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Columbus

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A Romance



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CHAPTER I

THE WAYFARER

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A MAN AND a boy climbed the slope from the estuary of the Tinto by a sandy path that wound through a straggling growth of pine-trees. It was the eventide of a winter's day at about the time that the Spanish Sovereigns were moving to the investment of Granada, which informs you that these events fell out in the closing decade of the fifteenth century.

From the long line of dunes below them, the Arenas Gordas, stretching away for miles towards Cadiz, the sand was tossed and whirled like spindrift by a bitter wind that blew from the south-west. Beyond, the storm-lashed Atlantic was grey under grey skies.

The man was well above the common height, broad-shouldered and long-limbed, fashioned in lines of great athletic vigour. From under a plain round hat his hair, red, thick and glossy, hung to the nape of his neck. Grey eyes shone clear in a weathered face whose patrician mould and stamp of pride were at odds with the shabbiness of his wear. A surcoat of homespun, once black but faded now to a mournful greenish hue, clothed him to the knees, and was caught about his middle by a belt of plain leather. From this a dagger hung on his right hip and a leather srip on his left thigh. His hose was of coarse black wool; he was roughly shod, and he carried his meagre gear bundled in a cloak and slung from his shoulder by a staff of quince-wood. His age was little beyond the middle thirties.

The boy, a sturdy child of seven or eight, clinging to his right hand, looked up to ask: "Is it much farther?"

He spoke in Portuguese, and was answered by his sire in the same tongue, on a note that was half-bitter, half-whimsical.

"Now, God avail me, child, that is a question I've been asking myself these ten years, and never found the answer yet." Then, abruptly changing to the commonplace, he added: "No, no. See. We are almost there."

A turn of the path had brought into view a long, low building, irregularly quadrangular, starkly white against the black wall of pine-trees that screened it from the east. From the heart of it sprouted upwards like a burnt-red mushroom the circular tiled roof of a chapel.

"For to-night that should be the end of our journey. If I am fortunate, Diego, it may also be a beginning." He resumed his whimsical tone, as if thinking aloud rather than addressing another. "The Prior, I am told, is a man of learning who commands the ear of a Queen, having once been her confessor. To confess a woman is commonly to hold her afterwards in a measure of subjection. One of the lesser mysteries of our mysterious life. But we walk delicately, asking nothing. In this world, my child, to ask is to be denied and avoided. It's a lesson you'll learn later. In order to possess what you lack, study to let none suspect that you seek it. Display to them, rather, the advantages to themselves of persuading you to accept it. They will then be eager to bestow. It is too subtle, Diego, for your innocent mind. Indeed, for long it eluded even mine, which is far from innocent. We go to test it now upon this good Franciscan."

It is among the obiter dicta of the good Franciscan of whom he spoke, Frey Juan Perez, who was Prior of the Convent of La Rabida, that the temper of a man's soul is commonly displayed in his voice. It is possible that Frey Juan's was more subtly attuned than the common ear. It is possible that his wide experience as a confessor—in which capacity he commonly heard without seeing, so that his consciousness would be centred in his hearing—had led him to discover a definite affinity between the spiritual qualities and the tone and pitch of voice of a penitent whose countenance was rendered invisible to him by the screen of the confessional.

Be that as it may, certain it is that but for this settled conviction of Frey Juan's our wayfarer would not so easily have attained his ends.

The Prior was pacing the courtyard at about the hour of compline, which is to say at sunset. The Borgia Pope, whose special devotion to the Virgin was to originate the Angelus, had not yet ascended St. Peter's throne. As Frey Juan paced, breviary in hand, reading with moving lips, as is canonically prescribed, the office of the day, his attention was disturbed by a voice addressing the lay-brother who kept the gate.

“Of your charity, my brother, a little bread and a cup of water for this weary child.”

There was nothing in the actual words, commonplace enough at a convent doorway, to claim the Prior's notice; but the voice, and, more than the voice, the contrast between the conscious pride that rang through its veiling huskiness and the humility of the request it uttered, might have compelled the attention of an ear even less sensitive

than Frey Juan's. Its accent was definitely foreign, and the dignity of its intonation gathered increase perhaps from the precision with which a cultured man must be expressing himself in a language other than his own.

Frey Juan, whom we are not to acquit of a very human curiosity, especially in any matter that promised distraction from the gentle monotony of life at La Rabida, closed his breviary upon his forefinger, and stepped round an angle of the courtyard to view the speaker.

At a glance he recognized how perfectly the voice became the man whom he beheld. He discovered power spiritual and physical as much in his shapely height and upright carriage as in his shaven face with its strong line of jaw and aquiline nose. But it was chiefly his eyes that held the Prior: full eyes of a clear grey, luminous as those of a visionary or a mystic, eyes whose steady gaze few men could find it easy to support. He had set down his bundle on the stone bench at the gate. But neither that nor the rest of the stranger's shabby details could obscure in Frey Juan's discerning scrutiny the man's inherent distinction. Beside him the child, on whose behalf he sought that meagre hospitality, gazed upwards in round-eyed wistfulness at the approaching Prior.

Frey Juan advanced with a clatter of loose sandals, a barrel of a man in a grey frock. His face was long and pallid, with a deal of loose flesh about it, but made genial by the humour in the eyes and about the heavy-lipped mouth. He greeted the stranger with a kindly smile, and in formal Latin, to test perhaps his scholarship, or perhaps his faith, for that aquiline nose above the full lips need not be Christian.

“Pax Domini sit tecum.”

To which the wayfarer answered formally, with a grave inclination of his proud head: “Et cum spiritu tuo.”

“You are a traveller,” quoth the Prior unnecessarily, whilst the lay-brother stood aside in self-effacement.

“A traveller. Newly landed here from Lisbon.”

“Do you go far to-night?”

“Only as far as Huelva.”

“Only?” Frey Juan raised his thick brows. “It is a good ten miles. And by night. Do you know the way?”

The wayfarer smiled. “Direction should suffice for one trained to find his way over the trackless ocean.”

The Prior caught a vaunting note in the answer. It prompted his next question. “A great traveller?”

“Judge if I may so describe myself. I’ve sailed as far as northern Thule and southern Guinea, and eastwards to the Golden Horn.”

The Prior sucked in his breath, and scanned the man more shrewdly, as if suspicious of a claim so vast. The scrutiny must have reassured him, for at once he grew cordial.

“That is to have touched the very boundaries of the world.”

“Of the known world, perhaps. But not of the actual world. Not by many a thousand miles.”

“How can you assert that, never having seen it?”

“How can your paternity assert that there is a Heaven and a Hell, never having seen them?”

“By faith and revelation,” was the grave answer.

“Just so. And in my case, to faith and revelation I may add cosmography and mathematics.”

“Ah!” Frey Juan’s prominent eyes considered him with a deepening interest. “Come you in, sir, in God’s name. It is draughty here, and the evening chill. Close the gate, Innocencio. Come you in, sir. We were shamed if we had no better hospitality than that of your modest prayer.” He took the stranger by the sleeve to draw him on. “What is your name, sir?”

“Colon. Cristobal Colon.”

Again Frey Juan’s shrewd eyes scrutinized the Semitic lines of that lofty countenance. There were New Christians of that name, and he could call to mind more than one consigned by the Holy Office to the fire as relapsed judaizers.

“Your way of life?” he asked.

“I am a mariner and a cosmographer by trade.”

“A cosmographer!” The tone implied that the Prior’s interest was increased by the description; as, indeed, it was; for Frey Juan was a scholar whose wide studies included, as Colon had been informed, the provoking mysteries of cosmography.

A bell began to toll. Lights from the leaded gothic windows that overlooked the courtyard, the windows of the chapel, beat dimly upon the lingering daylight.

“It is the hour of vespers,” said Frey Juan. “So I must leave you. Innocencio will conduct you to our guest-chamber. We shall see each other again at supper. Meanwhile we shall supply the needs of your child. It is understood that you spend the night with us.”

“You are very good to a stranger, Sir Prior,” was Colon’s acknowledgment of an invitation upon which he had counted, and for which he had angled in his vaunting self-description.

Frey Juan, no less disingenuous, was content to answer by a wave of deprecation. For kindly man though he was, it was not kindness only that prompted the hospitality. If he knew his world, this was no ordinary traveller. There might be profit in talk with such a man; and if not profit, at least entertainment such as came too rarely into Frey Juan’s present claustral life.

The lay-brother held a door; but Colon hung back, to express himself in terms that reassured the Prior on the score of his faith.

“To rest is less urgent than to give thanks to God and Our Lady for having led my steps to so hospitable a house. By your leave, father, I will go with you to vespers. For the tender little one it is different. If our brother will take him meanwhile in his care, it will deepen my obligation.”

He stooped to speak to the child, who, born and bred in Portugal, had stood intent but puzzled by this talk in unknown Castilian. What he said, holding the promise of refreshment, sent the lad eagerly to the lay-brother’s side. From the gothic portal of the chapel his father watched him go, with eyes that were tender. Then he turned abruptly.

“I keep your reverence.”

With a kindly smile the Prior waved him on into the little chapel of Our Lady of Rabida, whose image enjoyed miraculous fame as a prophylactic against madness.

The bell ceased. The friars were already in the choir, and leaving Colon in the empty nave, Frey Juan went on and up to his place.

CHAPTER II

THE PRIOR OF LA RABIDA

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“DIXIT DOMINUS DOMINO MEO: SEDE A DEXTRIS MEIS.”

The Gregorian chant swelled up, and Frey Juan, peering through the luminous mist set up by the tapers into the twilight beyond, was gratified to see his kneeling guest in an attitude of rapt devotion.

Anon, because of the interest aroused in him, the Prior was not content that supper should be served to the stranger in the bare hall where charity was dispensed to casual wayfarers, but, treating him as an honoured guest, bade him to his own table.

Colon accepted the invitation as his due, without surprise or hesitation, and the brethren ranged at the trestles set against the walls along the refectory's length, furtively observed this meanly garbed stranger striding beside the Prior with the proud carriage of a prince, and asked themselves what hidalgo might be honouring their house.

Up that long bleak hall Frey Juan conducted him to the Prior's table on a shallow dais across the end of it, surmounted by a fresco of the Last Supper so crudely painted as to be presumed the work of one of the friars. Another fresco no less crude, of St. Francis receiving the stigmata, adorned the ceiling, now dimly revealed in the light of a six-beaked oil lamp suspended from it. For the rest two Dukes of Medina Celi, painted in life-size and as if their limbs and trunks and heads were made of wood, scowled at each other across the hall from walls that were coated with

the whitewash which the Arab had brought to Spain. The windows, square and barred, were set along the northern wall, at a height which admitting light afforded no distracting view of the outer world.

The food was plain but good: fish fresh from the port below in a pungent stew, followed by a broth of veal. There was wheaten bread and a sharp but wholesome wine of Palos, from the vineyards on the western slopes beyond the pinewoods.

They ate to the drone of a friar's voice, reading from a stone pulpit in the southern wall, a chapter from a *Vita et Gesta* of St. Francis.

Colon was seated on the Prior's right with the almoner on his other side. On Frey Juan's left the Sub-Prior and the master of the novices completed the group at the Prior's table. Seen through the misty light from the candlebranch that graced it, the grey lines of the minorites below looked ghostly in the crepuscular gloom enshrouding them.

When at last the reading ceased they stirred into life, and in that hour of relaxation a subdued hum of talk arose. To the Prior's table came a dish of fruit—sleek oranges, dried figs of Smyrna and some half-withered apples, besides a flagon of Malmsey. Frey Juan brimmed a cup for his guest, perhaps with intent to loosen a tongue that should have much to tell. After that, as he still sat bemused, the Prior ventured to spur him by a direct question.

“And so, sir, having voyaged far and wide you are now come to rest here in Huelva.” Thick-lipped, he lisped a little in his speech.

Colon roused himself. "To rest?" His tone derided the suggestion. "This is but a stage in a new journey. I may stay some days there, with a relative of my wife, who is now in the peace of God. Then I go forth again on my travels." And he added almost under his breath: "Like Cartaphilus, and perhaps as vainly."

"Cartaphilus?" The Prior searched his memory. "I do not think I have heard of him."

"The cobbler of Jerusalem who spat upon Our Lord, and who is doomed to walk the earth until the Saviour comes again."

Frey Juan showed him a shocked countenance. "Sir, that is a bitter comparison."

"Worse. It is a blasphemy wrenched from me by impatience. Am I not named Cristobal? Is there no omen to hearten me in such a name? Cristobal. Christum ferens. Bearer of Christ. That is my mission. For that was I born. For that am I chosen. To bear the knowledge of Him to lands as yet unknown."

The Prior's eyes were round with inquiry. But before he could give it utterance, the Sub-Prior on his left inclined his head to murmur to him. Frey Juan assented by a nod, and a general rising followed for the "Deo gratias" which the Sub-Prior pronounced.

Colon, however, was not to go with the departing friars. As they trooped out, Frey Juan resumed his seat in the high chair, and with a hand on his guest's sleeve drew him down to sit again beside him. "We need not hasten," he said, and refilled Colon's cup with the sweet Malmsey.

“You spoke, sir, of lands as yet unknown. What lands be these? Have you in mind the Atlantis of Plato, or the Island of the Seven Cities?”

Colon’s eyes were lowered so that Frey Juan might not detect their sudden gleam at the very question he desired, the question that suggested that the scholarly friar who might influence a queen was caught already in the web of interest his guest was spinning.

“Your reverence jests. Yet, was Plato’s Atlantis such a fable? May not the Fortunate Isles and the Azores be remnants of it? And may there not be still other, greater remnants in seas as yet uncharted?”

“These are, then, your unknown lands?”

“No. I have no such speculative things in mind. I seek the great empire in the west, which I know to be of more definite existence, and with which I will endow the crown that may be given grace to support my quest.”

A sudden vehemence in him first startled the Prior; then its histrionic note drew a smile to his pursy lips. He scoffed good-naturedly.

“You know of the existence of these lands. You know, you say. You have seen them, then?”

“With the eyes of the soul. With the eyes of the intellect with which God’s grace has endowed me to the end that I may spread in them the knowledge of Him. So clear my vision, reverend sir, that I have charted these lands.”

It was not for a man of Frey Juan’s faith to mock at visions. Yet of visionaries, being a practical man, he was naturally suspicious.

“I am, myself, a humble student of cosmography and philosophy, yet I may be a dullard. For such knowledge as I possess does not explain how that may be charted which has not been seen.”

“Ptolemy had not seen the world he charted.”

“But he possessed evidence to guide him.”

“So do I. And more than evidence. Your paternity will admit that it is by logical inference from the known that we proceed to discover the unknown. Were it not so philosophy must stand arrested.”

“In matters of the spirit that may be true. In matters physical I am not so clear, and I must prefer evidence to imaginings however logically founded.”

“Then let me urge such evidence as exists. Storms blowing from the west have borne to the shores of Porto Santo oddly carved timbers that have never known the touch of iron, great pines such as do not grow in the Azores, and huge canes, so monstrous that they will hold gallons of wine in a single section. Some of these may be seen in Lisbon now, where they are preserved. And there is more. Much more.”

He paused a moment, as if collecting himself; actually, in order to observe his host. Discerning a rapt attention in that full pallid face, he sat forward, and began his exposition, his tone quiet, level and precise.

“Two hundred years ago a Venetian traveller, Marco Polo by name, journeyed farther east than any European before or since. He reached Cathay and the dominions of the Grand Khan, a monarch of fabulous wealth.”

“I know, I know,” Frey Juan interposed. “I possess a copy of his book. I have mentioned that these are matters of which I, too, am a humble student.”

“You possess his book!” There was a sudden eagerness in Colon’s face that brought to it an increase of youth. “That spares me a deal. I did not know,” he lied, “that I talk to one already enlightened.”

“You are not to flatter me, my son,” said Frey Juan, not innocent perhaps of irony. “What did you find in Marco Polo that I have lacked the wit to discover?”

“Your paternity will recall the allusion to the Island of Zipangu, known by the people of Mangi—the farthest point he, himself, had reached—to be situated fifteen hundred miles farther to the east.” Frey Juan’s nod encouraged him to continue. “You will remember the fabulous abundance of the gold in those regions. Its sources, he says, are inexhaustible. So common is the metal that the very roof of the king’s palace is covered with plates of it, as we cover ours with lead. He tells us, too, of the great abundance of precious stones and pearls, and in particular of a pink pearl of great size.”

“Vanitas vanitate,” the Prior deprecated.

“Not, by your leave, if well applied. Not if employed for the furtherance of worthy ends. Wealth is not mere vanity then; and here is wealth beyond all European dreams.”

The very thought of it seemed to plunge him into a state of contemplation from which he was impatiently aroused by Frey Juan.

“But what has this Zipangu of Marco Polo to do with your discoveries? You spoke of lands across the western ocean.

Assuming all the eastern marvels of Marco Polo to be true, how are they evidence of your western lands?"

"Your paternity believes the earth to be a sphere?" He took an orange from the dish, and held it up. "Like this."

"That is now the general belief among philosophers."

"And you accept, of course, the division of its circumference into three hundred and sixty degrees?"

"A mathematical convention. That offers no difficulty. And then?"

"Of these three hundred and sixty degrees the known world includes but some two hundred and eighty. That is a fact upon which all cosmographers agree. Thus, the known lands from the westernmost point, say Lisbon, to the extreme of the charted eastern lands, leave still some eighty degrees—nearly a quarter of the earth's total—to be accounted for."

The Prior made a dubious lip. "We are told that it is all a waste of water, so storm-tossed and wild that there can be no hope to navigate it."

Colon's eyes flashed scorn. "A tale of weaklings who dare not make the attempt. There were also fables of an impassable belt of flame along the equinoctial line, a superstition which Portuguese navigators along the coast of Africa have derided.

"Give me your attention, reverend sir. Here, then, is Lisbon." He marked a point upon the orange. "And here the uttermost point of Cathay: a vast distance of some fourteen thousand miles by my own measurement of the degree, which on this parallel I compute to be of fifty miles.

“Now if instead of travelling east by land, we travel west by water, thus ...” and his finger now went leftwards round the orange from the point where he had placed Lisbon, “... we come, within eighty degrees, to the same charted point. Your paternity will perceive that it is not merely a paradox to say that we may reach the east by travelling west. To the golden Zipangu of Polo the distance by the west cannot be much above two thousand miles. Thus far we go by evidence. Inference justifies the belief that Zipangu is by no means the farthest limit of the Indies. It is merely as far as the Venetian’s knowledge went. There must be other islands, other lands, an empire that awaits possession.”

With such ardour had he made his exposition that Frey Juan was touched by something of his fire. The simple homely demonstration with the orange had disclosed one of those obvious facts which until indicated can elude the acutest mind. The Prior had been swept almost helplessly along by the strong current of the young cosmographer’s enthusiasm. But here of a sudden he perceived an obstacle, to which his sanity must cling lest he be carried utterly away.

“Wait. Wait. You say there must be other lands. That is to go farther than I dare follow you, my son. It is no more than your belief, a belief in which you may be deceived.”

Colon’s exaltation was not cooled. Rather, being fanned, it flamed more hotly. “If it were only that, it would not be an inference. And a well-founded inference your paternity shall acknowledge it. It is based no longer on mathematics, but on theology. We have it upon the authority of the Prophet Esdras that the world is six parts land to one of water. Apply

that here, and tell me where I am at fault. Or let it pass unheeded. Leave out of account my imagined lands, which would halve the distance." He dropped the orange back into its dish. "It still remains that the Indies lie within two thousand miles of us to westward."

"And is that naught?" The Prior was suddenly aghast at the vision that rose before his eyes. "Two thousand miles of empty waters holding perils known to God alone. The very thought is terrifying. Where is the courage that would so adventure itself into the unknown?"

"It is here." Colon smote his breast. He sat erect, all pride, the glow of his eyes fanatical. "The Lord, Who with so palpable a hand opened my understanding, so that reason, mathematics and charts are as naught to my inspiration, opened up also my desire and endowed me with the spirit necessary to an instrument of the Divine Will."

The force in him was one to bludgeon reason, the confidence a fire in which to consume all doubt. Frey Juan, already won by Colon's cosmography and logic, found himself now subdued into participation in the man's fanatical assurance.

"In my vanity—for which God forgive me—I have thought that I had some learning. But you reveal me to myself a mere groper in these mysteries." He hung his head in thought for a moment. Colon, sipping his Malmsey, watched him like a cat.

Suddenly the Prior asked: "Whence are you, sir? For from your speech it is clear that you are not of Spain."

Colon hesitated before giving an answer that was yet no answer. "I am from the Court of his Highness King John of

Portugal, and on my way to France.”

“To France? What do you seek there?”

“I do not seek. I offer. I offer this empire of which I have spoken.” He alluded to it as to something already in his possession.

“But to France?” Frey Juan’s face was blank. “Why to France?”

“Once I offered it to Spain, and was left to the judgment of a churchman, which was like sending me to a mariner for a judgment on theology. Then I went to Portugal, and wasted time upon learned dullards whose armour of prejudice I had no arts to pierce. There, as in Spain, there was none to sponsor me, and the lesson I have learnt is that without sponsoring a man but wastes his time in seeking the ear of the rulers of these kingdoms. There is no land upon which I would more gladly bestow these treasures than upon Spain. There is no sovereign I would more gladly serve than Isabel of Castile. But how am I to reach her Highness? If I commanded an interest powerful enough to deserve her ear, intelligent enough to perceive the value of what I bring, and persuasive enough to induce her to receive me, then ... why then I should be content to stay. But where am I to find such a friend?”

Absently the Prior’s forefinger was tracing a circle on the oaken table with a drop of spilled wine.

Covertly watching him, after a momentary pause, Colon answered his own question. “I command no such friend in Spain. That is why I seek the King of France. If I fail with him, too, then I shall challenge fortune in England. You begin to

perceive, perhaps, why I liken myself to the errant Jew, Cartaphilus.”

Still the Prior’s forefinger continued its absent-minded tracing.

“Who knows?” he murmured at last.

“Who knows what, reverend sir?”

“Eh? Ah! Whether you are wise. Sleep brings counsel, they say. Let us sleep on this, and talk again.”

Colon was content to leave it there. Not much had been achieved, perhaps, and yet enough to give him hope that he had not wasted time in coming to La Rabida.

CHAPTER III

THE SPONSOR

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NOTHING IN YEARS of his peaceful conventual life had kindled such a fever in Frey Juan as the words and person of Cristobal Colon. He spent, as he afterwards confessed, a night in which distracting wakeful thoughts alternated with fantastic dreams of golden-roofed Zipangu—by which name it is universally accepted that Marco Polo designates Japan—and of glittering jewelled islands dense with monstrous canes that gushed forth wine when tapped. It distressed his Spanish soul that empire over such lands should be lost to the Sovereigns, who had such need of treasure to repair the ravages of their war against the Infidel. His feelings in the matter were at once patriotic and personal. It was natural that having once been the confessor of Queen Isabel, his devotion to her was not merely that of a loyal subject; it included an affectionate paternal regard, reciprocated in her, he liked to believe, by a measure of filial piety. Representations from him on behalf of his odd guest might induce her to give the man's claims that consideration which Colon complained had formerly been denied them.

Pondering this as he lay wakeful on his hard pallet, the good Prior was ready to perceive the hand of God in the strange chance that had brought Colon to La Rabida. He was not to suspect that here was no chance at all; that Colon, as coldly calculating in furthering his aims as he was fiery in expounding them, well aware of Frey Juan's interest in cosmography and of the link that bound him to the Queen,

had made his way of deliberate intent to the convent, there to dangle a bait before the Franciscan's eyes. The Prior's curiosity, aroused by the ring of the wayfarer's sonorous voice, had simplified the course. Had it been lacking—and it is clear that Colon cannot have counted upon it—the request for a little bread and a drink of water for his child would have been followed by a prayer for a night's lodging. In the course of that he must have made an opportunity for just such an interview as Frey Juan's interest had spontaneously supplied.

Suspecting none of this, the Prior asked himself was there a miraculous quality, a divine intervention, in the sequel to the hospitality he had offered. It was, however, in the nature of Frey Juan to temper enthusiasm with prudence. Before committing himself to sponsoring Colon's case, he would seek confirmation by others, more competent to judge, of the faith the man inspired in him.

The others whom he had in mind were Garcia Fernandez, a physician of Palos whose learning extended far beyond the healer's arts, and Martin Alonso Pinzon, a wealthy merchant who had followed the sea, who owned some ships, and who was known for a mariner of great experience.

To his persuasions that Colon should postpone departure for at least another day, his guest yielded with a lofty air of bestowing favours, and on that second night after supper, when little Diego was abed, the four assembled in the Prior's cell. They crowded the narrow little room, whose furniture included no more than three chairs, a table, a writing-pulpit and Frey Juan's truckle-bed, with two shelves of books against the whitewashed wall.

There Colon was invited to repeat the exposition with which he had entertained Frey Juan last night. He came to it with hints of a vague reluctance be it to weary these gentlemen, be it to weary himself. But having begun and being caught up in the glow of his own ardour, the manifestly eager attention of his audience came to feed it. Expounding, he left his chair to pace the narrow limits of the cell, fiery of eye and liberal of gesture. He spoke in withering scorn of those who had disdained his gifts, and with haughty confidence of the irresistible power within him ultimately to open purblind eyes to a dazzling vision of those gifts.

Already before he came to those details which had so impressed Frey Juan, both the physician and the merchant were held by that power, which Bishop Las Casas, who knew him, tells us that Colon possessed, easily to command the love of all who beheld him.

Fernandez, the physician, lean and long, with a head shaped like an egg and as bald under his skull-cap, combed a straggling beard with bony fingers as he listened, his pale eyes wide, his body hunched within the black gabardine that clothed it. Sheath by sheath the scepticism in which he had been wrapped was being ruthlessly stripped from him.

Pinzon, on the other hand, yielded himself up readily to that fierce sorcery. He had come in unsuspected eagerness to the Prior's invitation because the matters upon which he was told that he was to hear this voyager were matters that had long lain within his own speculations. A square, vigorous, hairy man in the prime of life, bow-legged, with eyes vividly blue under thick black eyebrows, he had

something of the mariner's traditional easy, hearty manner. His lips showed very red within the black beard, but the mouth was too pinched and small for generosity. His sober affluence was advertised in a wine-coloured surcoat of velvet edged with lynx fur and the boots of fine Cordovan leather that cased his sturdy legs.

By the time the exposition reached its end these two who had been brought to sit in judgment scarcely needed for their conviction that Colon should unfold a chart on which to the known world he had added those territories of whose existence he was persuaded by his own inner light, besides Marco Polo and the Prophet Esdras. Nevertheless over that map, spread upon the Prior's table, they came reverently to pore at his bidding.

Fernandez, from his studies, and Pinzon, from his wide experience, were able to appraise not merely its clear perfection as a piece of cartography, but, save in one detail, its scrupulous exactitude in delineating the known world.

Upon this detail the old physician fastened. "Your chart gives two hundred and thirty degrees of the earth's circumference as the distance from Lisbon to the eastern end of the Indies. That does not accord, I think, with Ptolemy."

Colon received the criticism as if he welcomed it. "Nor yet with Marinus of Tyre, whom Ptolemy corrected, just as Ptolemy stands corrected here. I correct him also, you'll observe, in the position of Thule, which I, having sailed beyond it, found farther to the west than Ptolemy judged it."

But Fernandez insisted. "That is your authority. Your sufficient authority. But for the position you give to India

what authority exists?"

It was a moment before Colon replied, and then he spoke with a slow reluctance, as if something more were being dragged from him than he cared to give.

"You'll have heard of Toscanelli of Florence?"

"Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli? What student of cosmography has not?"

Well might Fernandez ask the question, for the name of Toscanelli, lately dead, was famous among cultured men as that of the greatest mathematician and physicist that had ever lived.

Pinzon's deep voice boomed in: "Who has not, indeed?"

"He is my authority. The computation that corrects Ptolemy's is his as well as mine." Brusquely he added: "But what matter even if it be in error? What matter if the golden Zipangu should lie some fewer or some more degrees in either direction? What is that to the main issue? It needs not the word of a Toscanelli to establish that whether we go east or west upon a sphere, ultimately the same point must be reached."

"It may not need his word, as you say, but your case would be immeasurably strengthened if you could show that this great mathematician holds the same opinion."

"I can show it." He spoke hastily, and would have recalled the words, for it offended his vanity that it should be supposed that his conclusions had been inspired by another.

The sudden, almost startled interest created by his assertion drove him to explanation.

“As soon as I could formulate my theories, I submitted them to Toscanelli. He wrote to me, not only fully approving of them, but sending me a chart of his own, which in the main corresponds with the one before you.”

Frey Juan leaned forward eagerly. “You possess that chart?”

“That and the letter setting forth the arguments that justify it.”

“Those,” said Fernandez, “are very valuable documents. I do not think a man lives with learning enough to dispute Toscanelli’s conclusions.”

Bluntly vehement, Pinzon swore by God and Our Lady that for him so much was not necessary. Master Colon’s speculations had pierced the very heart of truth.

The Prior, sprawling on the truckle-bed, purred now with satisfaction, declaring that it could not be God’s will that Spain, where He was so faithfully served, should lose the power and credit to accrue from discoveries vaster than any the Portuguese navigators had made.

From Colon, however, these protests evoked no further response. On the contrary, his manner became coldly forbidding.

“Spain has had her opportunity, and has neglected it. Engrossed in the conquest of a province from the Moors, the Sovereigns could not see the empire with which I offered to endow their crown. In Portugal a King who looked with favour on my plans, left decision to a Jew astronomer, a doctor and a churchman, a motley commission that rejected me, as I believe from malice. That is why I look afield. Too

many years already have I lost." He folded his map with an air of finality.

But the astute Pinzon, who knew his world far better than the other two, was less susceptible to awe of personalities. He asked himself why, if this man's decision to go to France were as irrevocable as he pretended, he should have been at the trouble now of so full an exposition of his theories. In Pinzon's view, what Colon sought whilst seeming to disdain it, was assistance in the execution of his tremendous aims. And so Pinzon addressed himself to the persuasion which he guessed to be invited.

He would be unworthy, he vowed, of the name of Spaniard, if, believing what they had now heard, he should neglect to endeavour to secure for Spain the possessions that would result from their discovery.

"I thank you, sir," was the lofty answer, "for this ready faith in me."

Pinzon, however, would not leave it there. "It is so solid, so much in accord with notions that have been mine, that I could even wish to bear some share in the adventure, to set some stake upon it. Give it thought, sir. Let us talk of it again." There was about him an eagerness scarcely veiled. "I could muster a ship or two and the means to equip them. Give it thought."

"Again I thank you. But this is no matter for private enterprise."

"Why not? Why should such benefits be for princes only?"

"Because such undertakings need the authority of a crown behind them. The control of lands beyond the seas