

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Taken from *Children's Classics in Dramatic Form*
A Reader for the Fourth Grade
By Augusta Stevenson

Scene I

Time: One morning in 1484

Place: A street in front of King John's palace, Lisbon, Portugal. Gates to courtyard of palace in background.

Characters:

Christopher Columbus
School Master
Carlos
Roque
Pancho
King John
Courtiers
Jester
Riverra (A sea captain)
Porter
Boys, Hostlers, Servants

(Enter Carlos, Roque and Pancho. They carry their school books. A noise is heard in the courtyard.)

Roque: *(Stopping and listening.)* There's stirring in the King's courtyard!

(He runs to closed gates; peeps through a crack.)

Carlos: Come, Roque, we shall be late to school.

Roque: *(Throwing down books)* Come, look! They are laying the red carpets in the court!

Pancho: *(Throwing down books; peeping)* 'T is for the King they lay them!

Carlos: Come, the master will be angry.

Roque: But the King will soon be coming!

Pancho: Not!! I know how the master flogs! Yesterday I came late to school.

Pancho: Why were you late?

Carlos: I stopped to watch the crazy Italian, Columbus.

(He starts off. The others follow.)

Roque: I saw him once!

Pancho: I wish I might see him!

Carlos: There he comes now! *(Calling)* Loco! *(Spanish for crazy)* Loco!

Roque: Aye, there he is! *(Calling)* Loco! Loco!

Pancho: *(Calling)* Loco! Loco!

(Enter Columbus, dignified and gentle. A crowd of boys follow.)

All boys: Loco! Loco! Loco! Loco!

(Enter Schoolmaster carrying a switch.)

Master: *(Flourishing switch)* To school with you! To school now!

(Boys run off in alarm.)

Master: *(Turning angrily upon Columbus)* You were teaching them your foolish notions, sir!

Columbus: *(Smiling)* I'd like the chance to do so, master.

Master: Ah, then you have been at it! I saw them all about you!

Columbus: I taught them nothing, master, -- this time.

Master: 'T is well for you, sir, that you did not. The world is flat, sir, flat! Do you not know that, sir?

Columbus: I was so taught—

Master: How do you dare, then, to say the world is round?

Columbus: Much study and common sense, dear master, have made me dare.

Master: The lessons taught your fathers are good enough for you, sir.

Columbus: That cannot be, dear master. How then could the world move on?

Master: Move on? Hear him talk! Do you think, sir, that an elephant carries this flat world on his back and walks about with it? Ha, ha!

(Gates are opened. Porter is seen.)

Master: *(Going)* Go tell the King this world is round! Ha, ha! Go tell the King!

(Schoolmaster goes.)

Porter: *(Seeing Columbus; aside)* Ah, 't is the crazy Italian!

Columbus: Porter, I seek the King!

Porter: Do you think he'll listen to your silly talk? O, I've heard of you! Away!

Columbus: Come, let me in!

Porter: Away! Away with you, loco!

(Enter from gates, the Jester in cap and bells, Hostlers and Servants.)

Jester: Who's away? Who's crazy?

Porter: The Italian there! He who says this world is round!

Jester: Round? How now? Round, you say?

Porter: *(Nodding and laughing)* With people on the other side!

Jester: A-standing on their heads—so!

(Jester stands on his head; all laugh. Enter a Courtier.)

Courtier: The King comes!

(Enter King John and many Courtiers.)

Jester: *(Capering about Columbus)* Ha, ha, ha, ha!

King: What's this, Jester?

Jester: Here's he, sire, who says this world is round!

(He capers about Columbus; all laugh.)

King: I've heard of your notions, Columbus. So you think there's land to be discovered, do you?

Columbus: Yes, your Majesty, I'm sure of it.

Jester: With people a-standing on their heads—so!

(Jester stands on his head; all laugh.)

King: Silence! Columbus, I've a mind to listen, and give you ships and money. Have you maps and charts to prove your plans?

Columbus: *(Taking maps from cloak)* Yes, sire.

King: Wait, then, till I have spoken with my Courtiers.

(Columbus bows, retires and unrolls maps. Captain Riverra crosses to Columbus; talks with him aside.)

King: *(Speaking softly to Courtiers)* You know, my Courtiers, that should there be new lands, great glory will be given the discoverer of them.

First Courtier: Aye, sire, 't will bring him great honor.

Second Courtier: And riches.

King: 'T is I, and I alone, who should have the honor and the riches!

First Courtier: Aye, sire!

Second Courtier: Aye, sire!

Third Courtier: But nothing can be done without the Italian's maps and charts. No one but he knows the route over the unknown seas.

King: Well, we must have his maps and charts.

First Courtier: He'll not sell them, sire. You may depend on that.

King: And we'll not buy them. Go, bid my fool take them.

(Courtiers showing surprise.)

Go, I say, and see to it!

(Courtiers talk aside with Jester.)

Riverra: *(To Columbus)* I wish you well, sir, for I believe that what you say is true.

Columbus: I'm glad to hear you say that, Captain.

Riverra: My ship is in the harbor now, and I must go. But I wish you well, Columbus, I wish you well.

(Columbus, throwing his maps on the stone bench near gates, takes Riverra's hands in his. The Jester creeps up, takes maps, runs into the court with them, and disappears.)

Columbus: *(With feeling)* I thank you, Captain – so few believe in me –

King: Come now within, Columbus; I'll look at your maps and charts.

(Riverra goes.)

Columbus: *(Turning to take up maps)* Why, how is this! My maps were here but just a moment ago!

King: Who saw his maps?

(Pause)

The Courtiers are silent, sir.

Columbus: I laid them there, sire!

King: Then there they should be.

Columbus: Someone has taken them – 't is a joke –

King: *(Interrupting)* My Courtiers do not play jokes in my presence.

Columbus: Those maps and charts are precious to me, sire!

King: Come, now, I'm not so sure you ever had maps or charts.

Columbus: Your Majesty!

King: Well, produce them.

Columbus: But, sire, --

King: *(Interrupting)* I'll not hear excuses! Your maps, sir, -- at once, sir!

Columbus: I'll make other maps and charts—

King: Away with you!

Columbus: Your Majesty –

King: Away, I say! And come to us no more with tales of unknown lands.

(Enter Jester from gates.)

Jester: With people a-walking on their heads – so!

(Jester stands on his head; all laugh. Columbus goes, showing bitter disappointment.)

Scene II

Time: 1492

Place: Spain. Court of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella

Characters:

King Ferdinand

Queen Isabella

Christopher Columbus

Captain Riverra

Wise Men

Courtiers and Ladies

A Monk, Father-Confessor to the Queen

Messenger

(Many Courtiers and Ladies are seen in audience-room of palace; a throne is in the background. Enter the First Courtier.)

First Courtier: The King and Queen!

Enter King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, followed by Courtiers, Ladies and the Wise Men. All bow as the King and Queen cross to throne and sit. Enter the Monk; he advances to throne and bows.)

King: Speak, good Father.

Monk: I pray your Majesties to see one Christopher Columbus.

King: *(Inquiringly)* Columbus?

Monk: The Italian who thinks he can find a short route to the Indies, sire.

King: *(Nodding)* Ah, I remember. You brought his plans to us some time ago, good Father.

Queen: *(Nodding)* Let us see him today, sire.

King: *(To First Courtier)* Admit this Christopher Columbus.

(Courtier admits Columbus. He kneels before the King.)

Rise, Columbus, and tell us what you seek.

Columbus: *(Rising)* Ships, sire, to prove the plans which I did send your Majesties; plans for sailing in the unknown seas.

Queen: They seemed to me most wise and sensible.

Columbus: *(With joy)* Ah, your Majesty believes with me?

King: *(Hastily)* I'd have our Wise Men speak. Unfold your maps before them, sir.

(Columbus crosses to Wise Men and unfolds a map before them. They look at it, shake their heads and laugh.)

Columbus: *(With dignity)* I propose to sail by this route to find that eastern land.

First Wise Man: Ha, ha! I never heard anything so absurd! He'd sail west to find the east! Ha, ha!

Second Wise Man: *(Pointing to map)* The edge of the world is out there in those strange waters. And you are willing to fall off with your ships into space, sir?

Columbus: I'm sure the water continues—

Third Wise Man: *(Interrupting)* How could there be land beyond? 'T would be under us, and the trees would have to grow their roots in the air.

(Wise Men nod wisely)

Second Wise Man: And the rain must needs fall upward there!

All Wise Men: *(Nodding wisely)* Aye! Aye!

Queen: I've heard you did lay your plans before King John of Portugal?

Columbus: I did, your Majesty.

King: That was bad for you, Columbus. King John sent ships, but they soon returned.

(Turning to Captain Riverra.)

Was not that the way of it, Captain? You sailed with them, I believe?

Riverra: Yes, sire. But the failure came because the sailors were afraid and refused to go on.

(To Columbus)

You were thus avenged for the theft of your maps, sir.

Queen: Would you sail again with this man as your leader, Captain?

Riverra: I would, your Majesty! I believe not in the monsters and the edge.

Queen: Nor I! Let's provide the ships, sire.

King: Our people would not like it – they'd grumble. And so 't would be bad for us.

(Enter Messenger in great haste; kneels before King and Queen.)

King: What news do you bring? Speak!

Messenger: The Turks have captured the Spanish merchant ships!

King: Our ships bound for the Indies?

Messenger: Yes, your Majesty.

King: Alas! Alas!

Queen: The merchants and the sailors – did the Turks spare them?

Messenger: Not one, your Majesty!

Queen: Alas, such loss of life! And it is not the first time! Not a month that does not bring us the same sad news!

First Wise Man: *(To Monk)* You must give our people consolation, Father.

Monk: It is not so much consolation they need, as another passage to the Indies; one far away from Turkey and the cruel Turks.

Queen: You are right, Father. Speak on.

Monk: To find such a passage is the chief purpose of Christopher Columbus. That is the hope that has given him courage when half the world called him fool.

Queen: Sire, we must find ships and money!

King: We dare not tax the people more...

Queen: Then I'll help you, Columbus! I'll pledge my own jewels to raise the funds.

Columbus: *(Joyfully)* Your Majesty!

Queen: It is for the safety of our merchants! It is for the glory of Spain!

Columbus: *(Kneeling before Queen; kissing her robe.)* My Queen!

Scene III

Time: Five months later; evening

Place: On board the Santa Maria

Characters:

Admiral Christopher Columbus

Captain Pinzon

Sailors

(The sailors are seen sitting on deck in a group. They are gloomy and dejected.)

First Sailor: It is a sea of darkness!

Second Sailor: Last night I heard the angry sea-gods!

Third Sailor: *(Nodding)* Aye, I heard them!

Fourth Sailor: What were they crying?

Second Sailor: Angry words to us for coming into their own waters.

First Sailor: It is the Italian Columbus the sea-gods should destroy!

All Sailors: Aye! Aye!

Second Sailor: We'll never see Spain again!

Third Sailor: We should compel him to return!

All Sailors: Aye! Aye!

(Enter Columbus with Captain Pinzon. They cross to bow of ship. The Captain glances uneasily at the sailors.)

Captain: Admiral, I must tell you frankly, the sailors are dissatisfied.

Columbus: I am sorry to hear that, Captain.

Captain: What shall we do, sir?

Columbus: Do? Why, sail on!

Captain: I'll see to it, sir!

(Captain goes.)

First Sailor: *(Crossing)* Admiral, the men have chosen me to speak for them.

Columbus: What do they wish?

First Sailor: To return to Spain, sir!

Columbus: Tell them we may see land any day now.

First Sailor: *(Shaking head)* They'll no longer listen to that!

Columbus: Then tell them that I mean to sail on.

First Sailor: *(Starting)* Sail on?

Columbus: Yes; to sail on and on. Go tell them that.

(Sailor goes. Enter Captain.)

Captain: Admiral, the sailors below show signs of mutiny!

Columbus: *(Alarmed)* Mutiny?

Captain: *(Nodding)* The same as these on deck. Only look at them!

(The sailors talk together excitedly and gesticulate wildly.)

Columbus: Ah, if I could only give them my courage!

Captain: I fear for your life, Admiral, if the order is not given to return.

Columbus: I cannot give it, Captain.

(The Sailors on deck are joined by others from below. They rush down upon Columbus.)

First Sailor: *(Angrily)* You must take us back to Spain, sir!

Second Sailor: We'll not go farther, sir!

All Sailors: Aye! Aye!

Columbus: I'm sure we will soon find land...

Sailors: *(interrupting angrily)* Hear him! Hear him!

Columbus: To the one who first sees land, the Queen has promised money—

First Sailor: *(interrupting)* Money! To feed to the sea-monster!

Second Sailor: *(Threateningly)* Will you turn back?

Columbus: *(With determination)* No!

Captain: Now, men, back to your duties.

Third Sailor: Alas! We'll never see our homes again!

Fourth Sailor: Nor our friends!

First Sailor: We are lost, men!

Second Sailor: What shall we do?

All Sailors: What shall we do? What shall we do?

(As their anger turns to despair, Columbus is touched.)

Columbus: Listen, men, --I make you this promise: if we do not see land within three days, we will return to Spain.

Captain: There, now, that's a fair promise! Go now to your duties!

Columbus: And let every man watch for land as he has never watched before!

Sailors: *(Pleased)* Aye, aye, sir!

(Sailors cross to a distant part of deck.)

Columbus: *(Sadly)* Alas for my plans and my hopes, if these three days bring not land!

(He talks aside with the Captain.)

First Sailor: We were too easily won over, men.

Second Sailor: *(Nodding)* Fearful things may happen to us in these three days!

Third Sailor: Suppose we reach the edge tomorrow!

Fourth Sailor: Suppose the sea-monster should come for us tonight!

All Sailors: Aye! Aye!

First Sailor: *(Cautiously)* Come closer, men! There's something I would say to you!

(Sailors close about him; Captain goes.)

First Sailor: *(Pointing to Columbus, who stands in bow looking at the stars.)* Why should he not fall into the seas tonight?

Second Sailor: What! You mean...

First Sailor: I mean he must fall into the seas tonight. Are you with me, men?

All Sailors: Aye! Aye!

First Sailor: *(Cautiously)* It is my plan to push him over as he stands there looking at the stars.

Fourth Sailor: Why not creep up on him now?

First Sailor: Are you willing, men, to have the deed done now?

All Sailors: Yes! Yes.

First Sailor: *(To Second and Third Sailors)* Come with me, you two! We'll creep up on his left.

(They creep up on Columbus, who is seen to suddenly bend forward, looking eagerly into the distance.)

Columbus: Land! Land!

(Sailors stop; enter the Captain.)

Captain: Did you say land, sir?

Columbus: Land, Captain, land! Come, Sailors, come! Land! Land!

Sailors: *(Looking; joyfully)* Land! Land!

Columbus: *(Lifting his arms)* Now Heaven be praised!

Note to teacher: This play conforms to the spirit of the traditional story of Columbus, but the dramatization has made it necessary to condense into one scene the somewhat prolonged negotiations with Ferdinand and Isabella.