

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

From the book "*Historical Plays for Children*"

By Grace E. Bird and Maud Starling

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CHARACTERS:

- Prior Juan
- Brother Lorenzo
- Brother Antonio
- Columbus
- Diego
- Ferdinand
- Isabella
- Bianca
- Alphonso
- Enrico
- A sleeping Cabin Boy
- Monks
- Court attendants
- Sailors
- Indian Chief
- Indians
 - Brave
 - Medicine Man
 - Squaw

SCENE I

Room in the Convent of La Rabida

(Occupied by Brother Lorenzo, Brother Antonio, Prior Juan, and other monks busy with various duties, copying manuscripts, etc.)

BRO. LORENZO: Hark! What is that?

PRIOR JUAN: Nothing but the wind rattling the door. Everything seems to be making a noise.

BRO. ANTONIO: *(Getting up and looking out the window.)* It is very dark outside. I can see nothing but the blackness of the night.

BRO. LORENZO: *(Following Brother Antonio to the window.)* How the wind howls! Heaven protect those out in this storm.

PRIOR JUAN: Listen! Someone is knocking at the gate.

BRO. ANTONIO: *(Taking down his cloak from the wall.)* I will go and let the stranger in.

BRO. LORENZO: Hurry! He is rapping again. Do not keep the poor stranger waiting.

(Brother Antonio goes out.)

PRIOR JUAN: *(Rising and closing the door after Brother Antonio.)* Hear the wind roar. Each moment it grows fiercer!

(Brother Antonio enters with Christopher Columbus and his little son, Diego. The boy sinks wearily to a bench. The monks remove the travelers' wet cloaks.)

PRIOR JUAN: Come close to the fire, strangers. The night is cold. *(They warm their hands at the open blaze.)* You are tired and hungry, I warrant you!

COLUMBUS: Yes, good friends, we are both faint for the want of food.

PRIOR JUAN: Lorenzo, bring bread and milk and meat for the weary travelers. *(Lorenzo goes out.)*

COLUMBUS: Thank you, Father. I knew we should find shelter and kindness at La Rabida. May God reward you!

PRIOR JUAN: How far have you journeyed?

COLUMBUS: Many, many miles. We are on our way to France.

PRIOR JUAN: That is some distance from here. I am surprised that you started on such a trip with a child.

COLUMBUS: His mother is dead; and I have no place where I may leave him. He goes everywhere with me.

PRIOR JUAN: *(Patting the boy on the shoulder.)* He is a fine brave fellow.

COLUMBUS: When he could walk no farther I carried him; but the storm overtook us, and we were obliged to find some shelter for the night.

DIEGO: I am so hungry, Father.

(Brother Lorenzo enters, bringing a tray of food.)

PRIOR JUAN: Eat your supper, child, and you, too, friend, refresh yourself.

(Columbus and Diego begin to eat.)

PRIOR JUAN: May I ask why you go to France this time of year?

COLUMBUS: To beg the king to buy ships for me. I want to cross the Atlantic; but I have no money for the voyage. By trade I am only a poor chart-maker.

BRO. LORENZO: No one has ever crossed that terrible ocean. Are you not afraid?

BRO. ANTONIO: People say it is full of fierce monsters and pools of fire.

PRIOR JUAN: Nonsense, no one has ever seen them. That is nothing but idle talk.

COLUMBUS: *(Taking a chart from his pocket.)* I have no fear of imaginary dangers. I am anxious to find a short way to India. I feel sure that it lies on the other side of the Atlantic.

PRIOR JUAN: I have given that subject some thought myself; and I have no doubt that you are right.

BRO. ANTONIO: (*Whispering to Brother Lorenzo.*) They must both be crazy.

BRO. LORENZO: (*Whispering to Brother Antonio.*) It sounds like it. They talk as if the world were round, instead of flat.

(*Diego begins to nod sleepily.*)

PRIOR JUAN: It is time for the boy to get to bed.

COLUMBUS: It is indeed. He is worn out. (*To the boy.*) Come, Diego, you must go to bed. I shall come to you soon. Good night, my son.

DIEGO: Good night, dear father. Come soon.

(*Brother Antonio leads the boy out. Brother Lorenzo removes the food.*)

PRIOR JUAN: You cannot walk all the way to France with that child.

COLUMBUS: (*Going to the window and looking out into the night.*) Oh, yes we must start tomorrow morning. There is no time to lose

PRIOR JUAN: Why not request the queen of Spain to provide ships for your expedition? Her Majesty is kind and gracious.

COLUMBUS: I have already sought her assistance; but both she and King John of Portugal have refused to help me.

PRIOR JUAN: (*Walking across the floor.*) I know Queen Isabella well. I was at one time her father confessor. I will write and beseech her to give you the ships you need.

COLUMBUS: You are too good, Father, but would she consent after having once refused?

PRIOR JUAN: It will do no harm to try. (*He opens a desk and begins to write.*) She has never refused me a favor. (*He finishes the letter while Columbus studies a chart.*)

PRIOR JUAN: (*Handing Columbus the letter.*) Read that and see if it conveys your wishes.

COLUMBUS: It is better than anything I could write, Father.

PRIOR JUAN: (*Motioning to one of the younger monks.*) There is a lull in the storm. Saddle a horse and ride to the next monastery. Here is a message for the queen. Early in the morning continue your journey--May her Majesty grant us a gracious reply!

MONK: I will go at once.

PRIOR JUAN: In a few days we may hope for a reply. You and your son are welcome to remain with us until then.

COLUMBUS: I shall not forget your kindness, Father. You have given me new courage.

PRIOR: It is now time to go to the chapel, and then to our cells. It is our custom to retire early.

COLUMBUS: That pleases me; for I am very tired, and shall be glad to have some rest. (*Each takes a candle,*

and they all go out.)

SCENE II

The Court of Ferdinand and Isabella, King and Queen of Spain

(Enter Columbus accompanied by attendants. He kneels at the feet of the king. He motions him to rise.)

FERDINAND: You have come promptly in answer to our message.

COLUMBUS: Yes, your Majesty, I am anxious to begin my voyage across the Atlantic.

ISABELLA: *(Holding a piece of paper.)* This letter from Prior Juan of La Rabida has aroused his interest.

FERDINAND: We fear that such an expedition may be a failure. The last explorers who attempted that voyage found nothing but clouds out there in the ocean.

ISABELLA: *(Turning to Ferdinand.)* He is a brave man to face the unknown dangers of the sea of darkness.

FERDINAND: *(To Columbus.)* Do you really think that you can find a short route to India?

COLUMBUS: I firmly believe so, your Majesty, and I am willing to risk my life to prove it.

FERDINAND: The danger is very great; and the cost of the ships will be considerable. We have spent so much money on war that we have none left to waste.

ISABELLA: Do not refuse him. I will sell my jewels to provide the means, if need be.

FERDINAND: Indeed, I fear that may be necessary, for Spain is no longer rich.

COLUMBUS: If I go, I can be the means of bringing you wealth. After I find a short way to India, rich silks and spices can be brought here by boat, thus avoiding the long overland journey.

ISABELLA: What you say is true. Ships move much more quickly than the caravans of the desert.

FERDINAND: My queen, do as you will; but I have very little faith in the plan.

ISABELLA: *(To Columbus.)* How many ships do you need?

COLUMBUS: Three will suffice, your Majesty.

ISABELLA: You may plan to make the voyage. I will be responsible for the necessary money.

COLUMBUS: I thank your Majesties. Heaven grant you may not regret what you have done.

FERDINAND: When do you wish to start?

COLUMBUS: As soon as possible.

FERDINAND: Then choose your men, and be ready to leave Palos at an early date.

COLUMBUS: I will lose no time. When I return, a trip to India will be an easy journey.

ISABELLA: Good luck to you, brave friend. Heaven prosper your undertaking.

COLUMBUS: I thank your Majesty. *(He bows and goes out. The rest follow, the king and the queen leading the line of courtiers and ladies.)*

SCENE III

Cabin of a Ship at Sea

ENRICO: *(With his elbows on a table and his head on his hands.)* We shall never see land again. I wish we had never come. I know the earth is flat. Some dark night we shall fall off the edge.

BIANCA: To continue this voyage is madness. The captain ought to be forced to turn the ship about and return.

ALPHONSO: Enrico, let us urge him to go home. If he refuses, we will throw him overboard.

ENRICO: Urge him yourself. I am not anxious to get into any trouble.

ALPHONSO: I am not afraid *(stepping up to Columbus, who is just entering)*. Captain, we are weary of this voyage. We demand that you turn the ship about and take us home.

COLUMBUS: Impossible, man, impossible!

ALPHONSO: *(Shaking his fist.)* If you refuse, we will compel you.

COLUMBUS: You are excited. Be patient a little longer.

ENRICO: Let us take the matter into our own hands. He will not listen to us.

COLUMBUS: Silence, my men! The king and the queen of Spain have sent me to find the Indies; and with the help of God I will go on until I reach them.

BIANCA: How much longer do you think it will take?

COLUMBUS: If we do not see land in three days, I will take you home. That is a fair arrangement. *(He picks up a spyglass and goes out.)*

ALPHONSO: Hear that, friends!

ENRICO: *(Raising his voice.)* We will hold him to his word.

ALPHONSO: Or throw him into the sea.

CABIN BOY: *(Waking up, rubbing his eyes, and stretching.)* As soon as I get to sleep somebody makes a noise and wakes me up.

ENRICO: We are all sleepy from staying up nights and watching for land. We are foolish to stand it any longer.

(Cabin Boy goes back to sleep.)

ALPHONSO: That lad has more sense than all the rest of us. He takes a nap every chance he gets.

SAILOR: *(Rushing in excitedly, with a stick in his hand.)* Here is a stick I found floating on the water. It has been cut with a knife. We must be nearing land.

COLUMBUS: *(Entering with a branch of a tree in his hand.)* Here is a branch with red berries on it. Land is not far off.

BIANCA: Hurrah for our captain. He was wiser than we were about this voyage.

SAILOR: I saw a strange light in the distance. It looked like a moving torch in the woods.

COLUMBUS: That is the white sand of the seashore.

CABIN BOY: *(Waking up.)* What is the matter now?

ALPHONSO: *(Shaking boy.)* Wake up, you lazy fellow. Land is in sight.

COLUMBUS: Get the small boats ready to land.

(All rush out, talking excitedly to one another.)

SCENE IV

The Seashore--San Salvador

(Indians are moving about. Columbus and the sailors fall upon their knees and kiss the ground. The Indians crowd around.)

CHIEF: *(To Indians.)* From where did those white-faced men come to our shores?

BRAVE: The broad wings of their ships have brought them from some far country.

(A squaw grunts, smiles, and strokes the bright-colored clothes of the Spaniards.)

MEDICINE MAN: Their language sounds musical. I wonder what they are saying.

CHIEF: They look friendly. If they were our enemies, they would begin to attack us.

SQUAW: Why do they kneel on the ground?

CHIEF: They may be praying to the Great Spirit.

BRAVE: They themselves look like spirits from heaven.

CHIEF: Perhaps we can make them understand us by signs.

BRAVE: I wish we could.

CHIEF: Let us welcome them!

(Indians approach the white men. They make signs and exchange presents. The Indians fall at the Spaniards' feet.)

COLUMBUS: *(Motioning them to rise, and examining some gold ornaments which the Indians have given him.)* This is a rich land, full of gold. We will lay claim to it. I am sure that no white man has ever been here before.

ENRICO: It must be Asia. Perhaps we have found India.

BIANCA: At any rate, we are the first to cross the Atlantic Ocean. That is something worth doing.

ALPHONSO: See the fine country and the beautiful trees! It is almost as pleasant here as it is in our own land.

COLUMBUS: The natives are good-looking men. They have proud and noble faces.

BIANCA: Their skin is dark, but they are well-formed.

ALPHONSO: And they are so friendly there is nothing to fear. If they were unfriendly, they might be dangerous enemies.

ENRICO: When we come again, the king will give us all the men and ships we need.

BIANCA: All Spain will want to come, after we go back and tell about this great country.

COLUMBUS: Now we will claim this new land, and then explore the country *(unfurling the flag of Spain, and planting the staff in the ground)*. In the name of the glorious sovereigns of Ferdinand and Isabella, I take possession of this land and name it San Salvador. *(They all go out.)*