

Legends and Short Stories About Christopher Columbus

Columbus at La Rabida

By Washington Irving (Adapted)

About half a league from the little seaport of Palos de Moguer, in Andalusia, there stood, and continues to stand at the present day, an ancient convent of Franciscan friars, dedicated to Santa Maria de Rabida.

One day a stranger on foot, in humble guise, but of a distinguished air, accompanied by a small boy, stopped at the gate of the convent and asked of the porter a little bread and water for his child. While receiving this humble refreshment, the prior of the convent, Juan Perez de Marchena, happened to pass by, and was struck with the appearance of the stranger. Observing from his air and accent that he was a foreigner, he entered into conversation with him and soon learned the particulars of his story.

That stranger was Columbus.

Accompanied by his little son Diego, he was on his way to the neighboring town of Huelva, to seek a brother-in-law, who had married a sister of his deceased wife.

The prior was a man of extensive information. His attention had been turned in some measure to geographical and nautical science. He was greatly interested by the conversation of Columbus, and struck with the grandeur of his views. When he found, however, that the voyager was on the point of abandoning Spain to seek the patronage of the court of France, the good friar took the alarm.

He detained Columbus as his guest, and sent for a

scientific friend to converse with him. That friend was Garcia Fernandez, a physician of Palos. He was equally struck with the appearance and conversation of the stranger. Several conferences took place at the convent, at which veteran mariners and pilots of Palos were present.

Facts were related by some of these navigators in support of the theory of Columbus. In a word, his project was treated with a deference in the quiet cloisters of La Rabida and among the seafaring men of Palos which had been sought in vain among sages and philosophers.

Among the navigators of Palos was one Martin Alonzo Pinzon, the head of a family of wealth, members of which were celebrated for their adventurous expeditions. He was so convinced of the feasibility of Columbus's plan that he offered to engage in it with purse and person, and to bear the expenses of Columbus in an application to court.

Fray Juan Perez, being now fully persuaded of the importance of the proposed enterprise, advised Columbus to repair to the court, and make his propositions to the Spanish sovereigns, offering to give him a letter of recommendation to his friend, the Prior of the Convent of Prado and confessor to the queen, and a man of great political influence; through whose means he would, without doubt, immediately obtain royal audience and favor. Martin Alonzo Pinzon, also, generously furnished him with money for the journey, and the Friar took charge of his youthful son, Diego, to maintain and educate him in the convent.

Thus aided and encouraged and elated with fresh hopes, Columbus took leave of the little junto at La Rabida, and set out, in the spring of 1486, for the Castilian court, which had just assembled at Cordova, where the sovereigns were

fully occupied with their chivalrous enterprise for the conquest of Granada. But alas! Success was not yet - for Columbus met with continued disappointments and discouragements, while his projects were opposed by many eminent prelates and Spanish scientists, as being against religion and unscientific. Yet in spite of this opposition, by degrees the theory of Columbus began to obtain proselytes. He appeared in the presence of the king with modesty, yet self-possession, inspired by a consciousness of the dignity and importance of his errand; for he felt himself, as he afterwards declared in his letters, animated as if by a sacred fire from above, and considered himself an instrument in the hand of Heaven to accomplish its great designs. For nearly seven years of apparently fruitless solicitation, Columbus followed the royal court from place to place, at times encouraged by the sovereigns, and at others neglected.

At last he looked round in search of some other source of patronage, and feeling averse to subjecting himself to further tantalizing delays and disappointments of the court, determined to repair to Paris. He departed, therefore, and went to the Convent of La Rabida to seek his son Diego. When the worthy Friar Juan Perez de Marchena beheld Columbus arrive once more at the gate of his convent after nearly seven years of fruitless effort at court, and saw by the humility of his garb the poverty he had experienced, he was greatly moved, but when he found that he was about to carry his proposition to another country, his patriotism took alarm.

The Friar had once been confessor to the queen, and knew that she was always accessible to persons of his sacred calling. He therefore wrote a letter to her, and at the same time entreated Columbus to remain at the convent until an

answer could be received. The latter was easily persuaded, for he felt as if on leaving Spain he was again abandoning his home.

The little council at La Rabida now cast round their eyes for an ambassador to send on this momentous mission. They chose one Sebastian Rodriguez, a pilot of Lepe, one of the most shrewd and important personages in this maritime neighborhood. He so faithfully and successfully conducted his embassy that he returned shortly with an answer.

Isabella had always been favorably disposed to the proposition of Columbus. She thanked Juan Perez for his timely services and requested him to repair immediately to the court, leaving Columbus in confident hope until he should hear further from her. This royal letter, brought back by the pilot at the end of fourteen days, spread great joy in the little junto at the convent.

No sooner did the warm-hearted friar receive it than he saddled his mule, and departed, privately, before midnight to the court. He journeyed through the countries of the Moors, and rode into the new city of Santa Fe where Ferdinand and Isabella were engaged in besieging the capital of Granada.

The sacred office of Juan Perez gained him a ready admission into the presence of the queen. He pleaded the cause of Columbus with enthusiasm. He told of his honorable motives, of his knowledge and experience, and his perfect capacity to fulfill the undertaking. He showed the solid principles upon which the enterprise was founded, and the advantage that must attend its success, and the glory it must shed upon the Spanish Crown.

Isabella, being warm and generous of nature and sanguine of disposition, was moved by the representations of Juan Perez, and requested that Columbus might be again sent to her. Bethinking herself of his poverty and his humble plight, she ordered that money should be forwarded to him, sufficient to bear his traveling expenses, and to furnish him with decent raiment.

The worthy friar lost no time in communicating the result of his mission. He transmitted the money, and a letter, by the hand of an inhabitant of Palos, to the physician, Garcia Fernandez, who delivered them to Columbus. The latter immediately changed his threadbare garb for one more suited to the sphere of a court, and purchasing a mule, set out again, reanimated by hopes, for the camp before Granada.

This time, after some delay, his mission was attended with success. The generous spirit of Isabella was enkindled, and it seemed as if the subject, for the first time, broke upon her mind in all its real grandeur. She declared her resolution to undertake the enterprise, but paused for a moment, remembering that King Ferdinand looked coldly on the affair, and that the royal treasury was absolutely drained by the war.

Her suspense was but momentary. With an enthusiasm worthy of herself and of the cause, she exclaimed: "I undertake the enterprise for my own crown of Castile, and will pledge my jewels to raise the necessary funds." This was the proudest moment in the life of Isabella. It stamped her renown forever as the patroness of the discovery of the New World.