

The True Story of Christopher Columbus

by

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Preface

This "True Story of Christopher Columbus" is offered and inscribed to the boys and girls of America as the opening volume in a series especially designed for their reading, and to be called "Children's Lives of Great Men." In this series the place of honor, or rather of position, is given to Columbus the Admiral, because had it not been for him and for his pluck and faith and perseverance there might have been no young Americans, such as we know to-day, to read or care about the world's great men.

Columbus led the American advance; he discovered the New World; he left a record of persistence in spite of discouragement and of triumph over all obstacles, that has been the inspiration and guide for Americans ever since his day, and that has led them to work on in faith and hope until the end they strove for was won.

"The True Story of Christopher Columbus" will be followed by the "true story" of others who have left names for us to honor and revere, who have made the world better because they lived, and who have helped to make and to develop American freedom, strength and progress.

It will be the endeavor to have all these presented in the simple, straightforward, earnest way that appeals to children, and shows how the hero can be the man, and the man the hero. E. S. B.

Boy With An Idea

Men who do great things are men we all like to read about. This is the story of Christopher Columbus, the man who discovered America. He lived four hundred years ago. When he was a little boy he lived in Genoa. It was a beautiful city in the northwestern part of the country called Italy. The mountains were behind it; the sea was in front of it, and it was so beautiful a place that the people who lived there called it "Genoa the Superb." Christopher Columbus was born in this beautiful city of Genoa in the year 1446, at number 27 Ponticello Street. He was a bright little fellow with a fresh-looking face, a clear eye and golden hair. His father's name was Domenico Columbus; his mother's name was Susanna. His father was a wool-comber. He cleaned and straightened out the snarled-up wool that was cut from the sheep so as to make it ready to be woven into cloth.

Christopher helped his father do this when he grew strong enough, but he went to school, too, and learned to read and write and to draw maps and charts. These charts were maps of the sea, to show the sailors where they could steer without running on the rocks and sand, and how to sail safely from one country to another.

This world was not as big then as it is now—or, should say, people did not know it was as big. Most of the lands that Columbus had studied about in school, and most of the people he had heard about, were in Europe and parts of Asia and Africa. The city of Genoa where Columbus lived was a very busy and a very rich city. It was on the Mediterranean Sea, and many of the people who lived there were sailors who went in their ships on voyages to distant lands. They sailed to other places on the Mediterranean Sea, which is a very large body of water, you know, and to England, to France, to Norway, and even as far away as the cold northern island of Iceland. This was thought to be a great journey.

The time in which Columbus lived was not as nice a time as is this in which you live. People were always quarreling and fighting about one thing or another, and the sailors who belonged to one country would try to catch and steal the ships or the things that belonged to the sailors or the storekeepers of another country. This is what we call piracy, and a pirate, you know, is thought to be a very wicked man.

But when Columbus lived, men did not think it was so very wicked to be a sort of half-way pirate, although they did know that they would be killed if they were caught. So almost every sailor was about half pirate. Every boy who lived near the seashore and saw the ships and the sailors, felt as though he would like to sail away to far-off lands and see all the strange sights and do all the brave things that the sailors told about. Many of them even said they would like to be pirates and fight with other sailors, and show how strong and brave and plucky they could be.

Columbus was one of these. He was what is called an adventurous boy. He did not like to stay quietly at home with his father and comb out the tangled wool. He thought it would be much nicer to sail away to sea and be a brave captain or a rich merchant.

When he was about fourteen years old he really did go to sea. There was a captain of a sailing vessel that sometimes came to Genoa who had the same last name—Columbus. He was no relation, but the little Christopher somehow got acquainted with him among the wharves of Genoa. Perhaps he had run on errands for him, or helped him with some of the sea-charts he knew so well how to draw. At any rate he sailed away with this Captain Columbus as his cabin boy, and went to the wars with him and had quite an exciting life for a boy.

Sailors are very fond of telling big stories about their own adventures or about far-off lands and countries. Columbus, listened to many of these sea-stories, and heard many wonderful things about a very rich land away to the East that folks called Cathay.

If you look in your geographies you will not find any such place on the map as Cathay, but you will find China, and that was what men in the time of Columbus called Cathay. They told very big stories about this far-off Eastern land. They said its kings lived in golden houses, that they were covered with pearls and diamonds, and that everybody there was so rich that money was as plentiful as the stones in the street.

This, of course, made the sailors and storekeepers, who were part pirate, very anxious to go to Cathay and get some of the gold and jewels and spices and splendor for themselves. But Cathay was miles and miles away from Italy and Spain and France and England. It was away across the deserts and mountains and seas and rivers, and they had to give it up because they could not sail there.

At last a man whose name was Marco Polo, and who was a very brave and famous traveler, really did go there, in spite of all the trouble it took. And when he got back his stories were so very surprising that men were all the more anxious to find a way to sail in their ships to Cathay and see it for themselves.

But of course they could not sail over the deserts and mountains, and they were very much troubled because they had to give up the idea, until the son of the king of Portugal, named Prince Henry, said he believed that ships could sail around Africa and so get to India or "the Indies" as they called that land, and finally to Cathay.

Just look at your map again and see what a long, long voyage it would be to sail from Spain and around Africa to India, China and Japan. It is such a long sail that, as you know, the Suez Canal was dug some twenty years ago so that ships could sail through the Mediterranean Sea and out into the Indian Ocean, and not have to go away around Africa.

But when Columbus was a boy it was even worse than now, for no one really knew how long Africa was, or whether ships really could sail around it. But Prince Henry said he knew they could, and he sent out ships to try. He died before his Portuguese sailors,

Bartholomew Diaz, in 1493, and Vasco de Gama, in 1497, at last did sail around it and got as far as "the Indies."

So while Prince Henry was trying to see whether ships could sail around Africa and reach Cathay in that way, the boy Columbus was listening to the stories the sailors told and was wondering whether some other and easier way to Cathay might not be found.

When he was at school he had studied about a certain man named Pythagoras, who had lived in Greece thousands of years before he was born, and who had said that the earth was round "like a ball or an orange."

As Columbus grew older and made maps and studied the sea, and read books and listened to what other people said, he began to believe that this man named Pythagoras might be right, and that the earth was round, though everybody declared it was flat. If it is round, he said to himself, "what is the use of trying to sail around Africa to get to Cathay? Why not just sail west from Italy or Spain and keep going right around the world until you strike Cathay? I believe it could be done," said Columbus.

By this time Columbus was a man. He was thirty years old and was a great sailor. He had been captain of a number of vessels; he had sailed north and south and east; he knew all about a ship and all about the sea. But, though he was so good a sailor, when he said that he believed the earth was round, everybody laughed at him and said that he was crazy. "Why, how can the earth be round?" they cried. "The water would all spill out if it were, and the men who live on the other side would all be standing on their heads with their feet waving in the air." And then they laughed all the harder.

But Columbus did not think it was anything to laugh at. He believed it so strongly, and felt so sure that he was right, that he set to work to find some king or prince or great lord to let him have ships and sailors and money enough to try to find a way to Cathay by sailing out into the West and across the Atlantic Ocean.

Now this Atlantic Ocean, the western waves of which break upon our rocks and beaches, was thought in Columbus's day to be a dreadful place. People called it the Sea of Darkness, because they did not know what was on the other side of it, or what dangers lay beyond that distant blue rim where the sky and water seem to meet, and which we call the horizon. They thought the ocean stretched to the end of a flat world, straight away to a sort of "jumping-off place," and that in this horrible jumping-off place were giants and goblins and dragons and monsters and all sorts of terrible things that would catch the ships and destroy them and the sailors.

So when Columbus said that he wanted to sail away toward this dreadful jumping-off place, the people said that he was worse than crazy. They said he was a wicked man and ought to be punished.

But they could not frighten Columbus. He kept on trying. He went from place to place trying to get the ships and sailors he wanted and was bound to have. As you will see in the next chapter, he tried to get help wherever he thought it could be had. He asked the people of his own home, the city of Genoa, where he had lived and played when a boy; he asked the people of the beautiful city that is built in the sea—Venice; he tried the king of Portugal, the king of England, the king of France the king and queen of Spain. But for a long time nobody cared to listen to such a wild and foolish and dangerous plan—to go to Cathay by the way of the Sea of Darkness and the Jumping-off place. You would never get there alive, they said.

And so Columbus waited. And his hair grew white while he waited, though he was not yet an old man. He had thought and worked and hoped so much that he began to look like an old man when he was forty years old. But still he would never say that perhaps he was wrong, after all. He said he knew he was right, and that some day he should find the Indies and sail to Cathay.

What People Thought Of The Idea

I do not wish you to think that Columbus was the first man to say that the earth was round, or the first to sail to the West over the Atlantic Ocean. He was not. Other men had said that they believed the earth was round; other men had sailed out into the Atlantic Ocean. But no sailor who believed the earth was round had ever yet tried to prove that it was by crossing the Atlantic. So, you see, Columbus was really the first man to say, I believe the earth is round and I will show you that it is by sailing to the lands that are on the other side of the earth.

He even figured out how far it was around the world. Your geography, you know, tells you now that what is called the circumference of the earth—that is, a straight line drawn right around it—is nearly twenty-five thousand miles. Columbus had figured it up pretty carefully and he thought it was about twenty thousand miles. If I could start from Genoa, he said, and walk straight ahead until I got back to Genoa again, I should walk about twenty thousand miles. Cathay, he thought, would take up so much land on the other side of the world that, if he went west instead of east, he would only need to sail about twenty-five hundred or three thousand miles.

If you have studied your geography carefully you will see what a mistake he made.

It is really about twelve thousand miles from Spain to China (or Cathay as he called it). But America is just about three thousand miles from Spain, and if you read all this story you will see how Columbus's mistake really helped him to discover America.

I have told you that Columbus had a longing to do something great from the time when, as a little boy, he had hung around the wharves in Genoa and looked at the ships sailing east and west and talked with the sailors and wished that he could go to sea. Perhaps what he had learned at school—how some men said that the earth was round—and what he had heard on the wharves about the wonders of Cathay set him to thinking and to dreaming that it might be possible for a ship to sail around the world without falling off. At any rate, he kept on thinking and dreaming and longing until, at last, he began doing.

Some of the sailors sent out by Prince Henry of Portugal, of whom I have told you, in their trying to sail around Africa discovered two groups of islands out in the Atlantic that they called the Azores, or Isles of Hawks, and the Canaries, or Isles of Dogs. When Columbus was in Portugal in 1470 he became acquainted with a young woman whose name was Philippa Perestrelo. In 1473 he married her.

Now Philippa's father, before his death, had been governor of Porto Santo, one of the Azores, and Columbus and his wife went off there to live. In the governor's house Columbus found a lot of charts and maps that told him about parts of the ocean that he had never before seen, and made him feel certain that he was right in saying that if he sailed away to the West he should find Cathay.

At that time there was an old man who lived in Florence, a city of Italy. His name was Toscanelli. He was a great scholar and studied the stars and made maps, and was a very wise man. Columbus knew what a wise old scholar Toscanelli was, for Florence is not very far from Genoa. So while he was living in the Azores he wrote to this old scholar asking him what he thought about his idea that a man could sail around the world until he reached the land called the Indies and at last found Cathay.

Toscanelli wrote to Columbus saying that he believed his idea was the right one, and he said it would be a grand thing to do, if Columbus dared to try it. Perhaps, he said, you can find all those splendid things that I know are in Cathay—the great cities with marble bridges, the houses of marble covered with gold, the jewels and the spices and the precious stones, and all the other wonderful and magnificent things. I do not wonder you wish to try, he said, for if you find Cathay it will be a wonderful thing for you and for Portugal.

That settled it with Columbus. If this wise old scholar said he was right, he must be right. So he left his home in the Azores and went to Portugal. This was in 1475, and from that time on, for seventeen long years he was trying to get some king or prince to help him sail to the West to find Cathay.

But not one of the people who could have helped him, if they had really wished to, believed in Columbus. As I told you, they said that he was crazy. The king of Portugal, whose name was John, did a very unkind thing—I am sure you would call it a mean trick. Columbus had gone to him with his story and asked for ships and sailors. The king and his chief men refused to help him; but King John said to himself, perhaps there is something in this worth looking after and, if so, perhaps I can have my own people find Cathay and save the money that Columbus will want to keep for himself as his share of what he finds. So one day he copied off the sailing directions that Columbus had left with him, and gave them to one of his own captains without letting Columbus know anything about it. The Portuguese captain sailed away to the West in the direction Columbus had marked down, but a great storm came up and so frightened the sailors that they turned around in a hurry. Then they hunted up Columbus and began to abuse him for getting them into such a scrape. You might as well expect to find land in the sky, they said, as in those terrible waters.

And when, in this way, Columbus found out that King John had tried to use his ideas without letting him know anything about it, he was very angry. His wife had died in the midst of this mean trick of the Portuguese king, and so, taking with him his little five-year-old son, Diego, he left Portugal secretly and went over into Spain.

Near the little town of Palos, in western Spain, is a green hill looking out toward the Atlantic. Upon this hill stands an old building that, four hundred years ago, was used as a convent or home for priests. It was called the Convent of Rabida, and the priest at the head of it was named the Friar Juan Perez. One autumn day, in the year 1484, Friar Juan Perez saw a dusty traveler with a little boy talking with the gate-keeper of the convent.

The stranger was so tall and fine-looking, and seemed such an interesting man, that Friar Juan went out and began to talk with him. This man was Columbus.

As they talked, the priest grew more and more interested in what Columbus said. He invited him into the convent to stay for a few days, and he asked some other people—the doctor of Palos and some of the sea captains and sailors of the town—to come and talk with this stranger who had such a singular idea about sailing across the Atlantic.

It ended in Columbus's staying some months in Palos, waiting for a chance to go and see the king and queen. At last, in 1485, he set out for the Spanish court with a letter to a priest who was a friend of Friar Juan's, and who could help him to see the king and queen.

At that time the king and queen of Spain were fighting to drive out of Spain the people called the Moors. These people came from Africa, but they had lived in Spain for many years and had once been a very rich and powerful nation. They were not Spaniards; they were not Christians. So all Spaniards and all Christians hated them and tried to drive them out of Europe.

The king and queen of Spain who were fighting the Moors were named Ferdinand and Isabella. They were pretty good people as kings and queens went in those days, but they did a great many very cruel and very mean things, just as the kings and queens of those days were apt to do. I am afraid we should not think they were very nice people nowadays. We certainly should not wish our American boys and girls to look up to them as good and true and noble.

When Columbus first came to them, they were with the army in the camp near the city of Cordova. The king and queen had no time to listen to what they thought were crazy plans, and poor Columbus could get no one to talk with him who could be of any help. So he was obliged to go back to drawing maps and selling books to make enough money to support himself and his little Diego.

But at last, through the friend of good Friar Juan Perez of Rabida, who was a priest at the court, and named Talavera, and to whom he had a letter of introduction, Columbus found a chance to talk over his plans with a number of priests and scholars in the city of Salamanca where there was a famous college and many learned men.

Columbus told his story. He said what he wished to do, and asked these learned men to say a good word for him to, Ferdinand and Isabella so that he could have the ships and sailors to sail to Cathay. But it was of no use.

What! sail away around the world? those wise men cried in horror. Why, you are crazy. The world is not round; it is flat. Your ships would tumble off the edge of the world and all the king's money and all the king's men would be lost. No, no; go away; you must not trouble the queen or even mention such a ridiculous thing again.

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