

## Columbus by Leo Rosten

<sup>1</sup>HE STRAINED HIS EYES for some sign of land, some omen from God --who, he was sure, was guiding him. They had left Spain ten long weeks ago. But where were they now -- the Indian Ocean? the China Sea? nowhere in a chartless sea? No map could guide him. His sailors had mutinied. If land were not sighted soon, he would turn the three ships back. Somewhere, somehow, some shred of land must be near. Land? No -- far more than land: fabled India, or Cipangu (Japan), or China itself!

<sup>2</sup>For ten years he had begged the kings of Portugal and Spain to finance this fantastic mission: to sail westward across the Atlantic, in hope of reaching the Orient, that treasury of the gold, jewels, perfumes, silks which crawled to Europe in caravans. He even carried (what optimism!) a letter to the Grand Khan, Kubla, whose dynasty had been overthrown a hundred years before... For the thousandth time, he strained his eyes for some sight of shore. His instruments were so crude that he could only guess at speed and distance; he was following the flight of birds. But where, O God, was land?

<sup>3</sup>The late moon rose. And at 2 a.m., October 12, 1492, a lookout shouted, "*Tierra!*" At dawn, they probed the reef and landed on a coral beach. "And all having rendered thanks to our Lord, kneeling on the ground, embracing it with tears of joy... the Admiral rose and gave this island the name San Salvador (Holy Saviour)."

<sup>4</sup>He was an arresting figure, this "Admiral: tall, blue-eyed, blondish-red of hair. He had that sense of his own importance which is the essence of command. Mystery still attends him: Born Cristoforo Colombo, he had called himself Cristóbal Colon in Portugal, Coloma in Spain, then Colón, by which half the world still knows him. He was a weaver's son,

yet dropped grandiose hints about a family coat of arms. He had sailed to England and, possibly, Greenland and Iceland. He was a passionate Catholic, forever fasting, praying, penitent -- but his forebears were probably Jewish. He spoke a Genoese dialect most Italians could not understand. He could not read or write until his twenties (when he arrived in Portugal -- by swimming ashore from a ship sunk in battle); then he devoured Marco Polo's romancings and Cardinal d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi* -- especially the idea that the earth is round.

<sup>5</sup>He was a mass of contradictions. He was magnanimous; he was mean. He was proud; he was petty. He was humble, vain, generous, jealous, morbidly thin-skinned. He was a prude who tolerated no profanity (not even among his sailors!), but he had a mistress and an illegitimate son. He endured frightful hurricanes with surpassing courage; he wallowed in self-pity for minor misfortunes. He was driven by a dream of converting the heathen to Christianity; he was blinded by a mania for fame. He treated the natives (who thought the pale men in shining armor had come down from the sky) with great gentleness; then he let the Spaniards hunt them down with vicious hounds and horses, (the first the "Indios" had ever seen) and slaughter them by the hundreds. He was, the first missionary-colonist in America -- and the first to take slaves. He wrote beautiful prose, but with wayward spelling and no punctuation. He was a matchless mariner and a wretched administrator. He was so mad with a sense of mission that he insisted that Cuba was Marco Polo's "Mangi," Haiti the land of Sheba, Venezuela the Garden of Eden!

<sup>6</sup>He had a rare flair for drama; he organized flamboyant processions in Spain, dressing his "Indios" in feathers and ornaments, making them carry parrots in cages, and sent trumpeters ahead to bring

out the crowds. When the Jamaicans refused to give him food, he consulted an almanac and announced that God would punish them by blotting out the moon! When the eclipse came, the Indians went wild with terror; and he calmly retired to his cabin, emerging only when he knew the eclipse was due to end, saying he had intervened with God -- and the shadow moved from the face of the moon.

<sup>7</sup>He brought Europe its first hammock, its first corn, sweet potato, yam. He was the first white man to describe that strange narcotic weed which, when smoked, was to give men more pleasure than any gold he could have found. On his second voyage, he was the proud commander of 17 ships and 1500 colonists. On his third voyage, he fell cat's-paw to the king's governor, who shipped him back to Spain in chains, and for six weeks he rotted in Seville, pleading for justice, before the chains were removed. He always kept them in his chamber to underline his bitterness.

<sup>8</sup>At the height of his glory, he was acclaimed "Very Magnificent Admiral of the Ocean Sea"; after his last "unsuccessful" voyage (no gold, no jewels, no silks, no spices), he was reviled as "Admiral of the Mosquitoes." He kept crying that he had discovered another world, but in one of history's cruelest ironies, the immense double continent he found was named not after him, but after another Italian navigator, Amerigo Vespucci.

<sup>9</sup>This lonely, harassed, invincible megalomaniac made four astounding voyages -- unparalleled for adventure and significance. He discovered the Bahamas, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti and Santo Domingo, Jamaica, Panama, the Virgin Isles, the mouth of the Orinoco -- without grasping the full importance of what he had achieved. He even came within 30 miles of the Pacific no European so much as dreamed existed.

<sup>10</sup>He did not know that he had opened

the greatest chapter in history; nor that he had doubled Christendom's empire after the disastrous Crusades had left the West shamed before Islam's triumphant infidels. He presented the restless, imaginative and insatiable white race with greater lands, and riches and prospects than any conqueror who ever lived. He did more than revolutionize geography; he flung the old world into a golden age. He changed more than the map of the world; he galvanized thought by enlarging its horizons.

<sup>11</sup>In his last years, plagued by malaria and gout, he often raved in delirium that God's voice told him He had done as much for him as for Moses and David. He had neither friends nor defenders now. Hated by the colonists, despised by the Spaniards, "I have reached the point where there is no man so vile but thinks it his right to insult me." He donned rough monk's habit, wandered from one monastery to another and tormented himself by forever asking why God was tormenting him.

<sup>12</sup>No person of consequence was present at his deathbed. He demanded that his chains be buried with him, willed his money to "the conquest of Jerusalem" and summoned a priest. His last words were: "Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit." The official chronicles did not even mention his death. —LEO ROSTEN

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