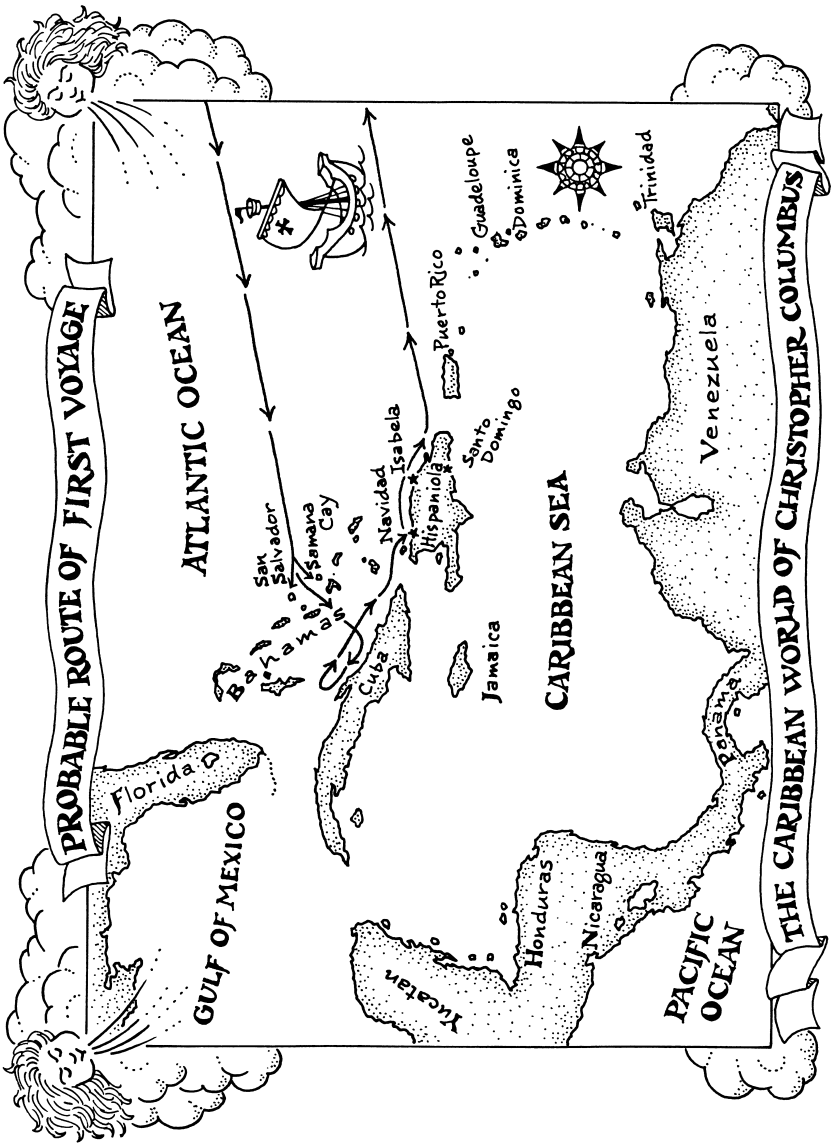
The First Voyage

one

The stillness of that predawn Friday belied what was about to transpire. On August the third, the Tinto River, lying as unruffled as the air, gave no suggestion that the world was about to be remade—deeply, widely, powerfully, and at times violently. Every beginning has a thousand beginnings and those beginnings have a thousand more, so that all inceptions carry unnumbered antecedents. To say of anything, "At that moment and in that place, it all began," is shortsighted, but within such shortsightedness, the European remaking of America and the American remaking of Europe began on a sluggish and undistinguished Spanish river near the commensurately undistinguished town of Palos not far from the Portuguese border. The King of Portugal, the greatest sea-faring nation of the day, had turned down an expedition like the one of three ships about to catch the



tide half an hour before the summer sunrise and be pulled toward the sea.

Christopher Columbus, the Captain General of the fleet, took communion in a chapel nearby before boarding his flagship and, "in the name of Jesus," giving the command to weigh anchors of the wooden vessels, small even by the standards of 1492. The seamen, perhaps taking up a chantey appropriate to the task, leaned into the long oars, stirred the polished river surface, and began moving the ships laden with enough provisions to last several months. Under the limp sails, to the groan of timbers and the creak of oars, ninety men began a voyage to an unforeseen but not unimagined land across uncharted waters in hopes of finding an unproved route to an Asian civilization more ancient than the one they were leaving. What the sailors didn't know was that they were headed to a soon-to-be-dubbed New World inhabited by peoples whose ancestors had resided there for at least 25,000 years. Even more significantly, the mariners were the small vanguard that would open not only a place new to them but also a new era that would slowly and occasionally catastrophically reach the entire planet. Those few sailors were initiating blindly but with highly materialistic motives new conceptions of civilization. Pulling on the oars, the able seamen had scarcely a notion they were propelling themselves and everyone to come after them into a new realm that would redefine what it means to be human.

When *Santa María, Pinta,* and *Niña* crossed the sandy bar to enter the Atlantic Ocean about a hundred

miles west of the Strait of Gibraltar, it was eight o'clock in the morning. Sea wind inflated the slack sails and forced a due southerly bearing the fleet followed until after sundown when the commander altered his course for the Canary Islands. The entire first day the men could look over the rails to see shoreline, but when they awoke the next morning, land was beyond anyone's ken.

Christopher Columbus—born Cristoforo Colombo but called in Spain Cristóbal Colón—was above average height (that still could mean under six feet), ruddy of face, aquiline nose, blue eyes, freckled, his reddish hair going white although he was only days away from his forty-second birthday. He was an experienced seaman, an excellent navigator with a scholarly bent and a devotion to his religion. We have his appearance from descriptions written by people who met him rather than from any pictures made during his life, for none has survived; given the time, that isn't surprising—portraits of even wealthy people were not common.

Although facts are scant, we do know with enough assurance to discount claims otherwise that he was born in northern Italy near Genoa, a major seaport, to Christian parents sometime between August 25 and October 31, 1451. His father was a master weaver and his mother the daughter of a weaver; Christopher and his younger brother, Bartholomew, also briefly worked in the woolen trade. Neither boy had much, if any, formal schooling. Christopher read classic geographical accounts in Latin,

and he later learned to speak Portuguese and Spanish. His youth was not impoverished, and his days in Genoa apparently were happy enough to allow him to honor that city throughout his life.

Columbus grew up in a medieval world exhausted by war and bigotries, religious corruption and intolerance, a time of widespread spiritual disillusion and social pessimism, a continent deeply in need of a rebirth. The very day before his little fleet departed Palos, the last ships holding Jews who refused to convert to Christianity were by royal edict to leave port for exile in the Levant. If Columbus, who must have witnessed this hellish expulsion as he readied his crews and vessels, was moved by the cruelty of the decree, he left no mention of it other than a general phrase, absent of any judgment, in the preamble to his log. His last act on European soil—his confession of sins—we may reasonably assume did not include anything about the boatloads of misery that had weighed anchor only hours before. This is not irrelevant contemporary moralizing, because the new realms he was about to force open would eventually give a poisoned Old World new opportunities to create several societies where such inquisitions and purges, tortures and pogroms, eventually would become all but impossible, and nations he never dreamed of would offer new lives to descendants of people Ferdinand and Isabella were expelling. Of several indirect and unintended Columbian contributions to humankind, this is one.

two

The first forty-eight hours of Columbus on the open Atlantic exist today as a mere two sentences telling nothing more than bearings and distances, but on the sixth of August the first accident occurred: The large rudder of *Pinta* jumped its gudgeons, that is, broke loose from its fastenings. Because of a rough sea, Columbus could bring *Santa María* only close enough to offer encouragement to the resourceful and independent captain of the *Pinta,* Martín Alonso Pinzón, and trust he would find a way to jury-rig the rudder. Pinzón succeeded in a temporary repair, and Columbus praised him for his ingenuity, a compliment not to be repeated for reasons that will become evident. Pinzón believed the problem was not an accident but the work of the owner of the caravel, who was also aboard and allegedly unhappy at having his ship by royal order commandeered for the expedition. Given the capacity of the Atlantic in those waters to beat up small vessels, and given the stupidity of endangering the very ship one is aboard, Pinzón's assertion seems dubious. Although Columbus himself had to charter his flagship *Santa María,* Ferdinand and Isabella granted him temporary use of the two other ships from Palos for a municipal offense the town committed against the crown.

On the morning of August the ninth, the sailors could see Grand Canary Island, but a calm prevented them from reaching harbor. After three days, a breeze rose and

moved the ships into the isles, with the limping *Pinta* heading to Las Palmas while the other ships sailed farther west to pass under the smoking volcano on Tenerife and anchor at San Sebastián on Gomera, one of the western Canaries. Despite the calm, the voyage from Palos had taken just twelve days, but waiting for repairs to *Pinta* required the next three and a half weeks. Columbus used the forced layover in the islands to change the triangular sails of *Niña* to square ones similar to those of her sister ships, a modification that also lessened the dangerous task of handling unwieldy canvas sheets at sea. The crews brought new supplies aboard, particularly food, water, and firewood. In effect, the first leg of the voyage, Palos to the Canaries, served as a shakedown cruise for an expedition put together rather hurriedly.

While on Gomera, Columbus may have been smitten by their beautiful governor, Doña Beatriz de Peraza y Bobadilla, a woman with a colorful history. His wife, Doña Felipa Perestrello e Moniz, had died not long after their son, Diego, was born. Columbus did not remarry, although in 1486 he took up with a young peasant orphan, Beatriz Enríquez de Harana, who gave birth to their son, Ferdinand. Although Columbus almost certainly never married Beatriz Enríquez—an arrangement not uncommon at the time, and perhaps never lived with her after the initial voyage—he was otherwise solicitous of Beatriz until his death. In a codicil to his will, he charged their son, Diego, to see that she was able "to live

honorably, as a person to whom I am in so great debt, and thus for discharge of my conscience, because it weigheth much on my mind." These things we know, but of dalliance in the isles with Governor Beatriz we have little more than whatever inclination toward romance readers might possess.

His journal also makes no reference to a local situation of far greater import. When Columbus arrived, the Canaries had not yet been entirely subjugated by Spain. Through cruelty and treachery on several of the islands, the Spanish were forcing the native Guanches into slavery and Christianity, a practice soon to be repeated across the ocean on a continental scale. During the very summer the Captain General was there, the Guanches still held their own on the volcano island of Tenerife, but the conquest of La Palma was under way. Nothing in the logbook alludes to these struggles. Since part of the Columbian mission was to bring the subjects of the Grand Khan in Asia under the dominion of Spanish religion, it's fair to wonder whether Columbus saw any foreshadowings in the struggles of the Guanches.

With *Pinta* repaired, *Niña* rerigged, and all three ships reprovisioned, the stores stacked to the gunwales, the fleet on the sixth of September drew up its anchors in the Old World for the last time. What bottom they would touch next, Columbus had no certain idea, but he was confident it was not far distant, for he believed in the notions of several ancient authorities who held that the Atlantic was

narrow; in the Canaries he recorded that many "honorable Spaniards" there swore that each year they saw land to the west. Could that place they thought they saw be Saint Brendan's Isle, a phantom then appearing on ocean charts and continuing to until the eighteenth century? Could it be Antillia, another phantom that would eventually give its name to the West Indies? Was it one of the outlier islands many geographers then believed to lie off the coast of Cathay (China)? Principal among those islands was Cipango (Japan), and it was directly for there that Columbus headed on the next leg of the voyage.

three

That none of the crew deserted during their twenty-five days in the Canary Islands suggests that the men were not beset by ancient fears about the Ocean Sea. They did not believe they were going to sail off the edge of the world and tumble willy-nilly into space. Everybody but the most benighted of that time knew the world was a sphere, and certainly sailors knew that above all others: How else to explain why a seaman atop a mast can see farther than he can from the deck or why he espies the masts of an approaching ship before the hull comes into view? Some of the men might have had notions about sea monsters, and it's likely all believed great and dangerous shoals could lie before them. Columbus himself considered it possible the fleet might come upon lands inhabited by humans with

heads in the middle of their chests, or people with tails, or men with the faces of dogs. Of all the fears, the greatest among the crew and the ones Columbus had to work against almost daily after the ships were well into uncharted water was the belief they would sail too far from Europe to be able to return home against contrary winds.

He surely instructed the sailors in his belief that the distance from the Canaries to Cipango was only 2,400 nautical miles, and—fortunately for them—the islands lay at virtually the same latitude (as in fact they nearly do); all the ships had to do was hold a course directly west. If the fleet were to come upon unknown islands on the way to Asia, they would be useful to reprovision before bringing in rewards of discovery.

His years of studying both ancient and contemporary geographers and travelers (including Marco Polo who wrote his account while incarcerated in, of all places, Genoa) convinced Columbus that Asia was a land stretching so far north and south that no westering sailor could miss it if his nerve and will did not fail him; nor, so he believed, was distance really much of a concern since the Atlantic was narrower than most learned men of his time assumed. In the years prior to departing, when Columbus was trying to convince various royal scientific committees about the feasibility of his voyage, the major disagreement wasn't, as is popularly supposed, whether the world was flat, but rather how wide the Ocean Sea was. Many of the scholars opposing Columbus were closer to the truth

than he, but as a man of medieval mind, he worked at things deductively: he knew where he wanted to go both in logic and on the sea, and he searched out views to support his own. We shall see this propensity again. The many, many annotations in three of his books of cosmology and geography reveal his geographical conceptions and his absolute stubbornness against admitting any evidence that might overturn his deep urge to find a westward sea route to the riches of the Indies. In his copy of Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi (Image of the World),* Columbus noted sentences like this: "Between the end of Spain and the beginning of India is no great width," and "Water runs from pole to pole between the end of Spain and the beginning of India," and "This [Ocean] Sea is navigable in a few days with a fair wind."

Nevertheless, knowing his men's fear of sailing past a point of return that would doom them, Columbus cautiously, wisely, kept two figures for the distance the ships covered each day: one he believed accurate and the other a deliberate underestimation to report to the crew. The lower figure also served to keep expectations down and increase their tolerance of long days with no signs of landfall. Some of them surely had heard that to reach Asia by a westerly sea route would require a fleet capable of being outfitted for a three-year round trip; and since it seemed unlikely there could be any undiscovered lands between Europe and Asia for reprovisioning vessels, the crew believed men on such a voyage would perish at

sea. As a discoverer, Columbus was a lucky man—even the geographical errors he made often worked to advance his goal. His achievements were the result of many things: incredible determination, fearlessness, capital abilities as a navigator and leader. But none was more important than his capacity to persuade Ferdinand and Isabella, especially the Queen, of the possibility of his correct notions. Had the American continents not been in the way, his sailors likely would have died before reaching Japan, a land almost five times farther from Spain than he calculated.

Of all the notations in his various books, one from Seneca, the Spanish-Roman philosopher and playwright, is most revealing: "An age will come after many years when the Ocean will loose the chains of things, and a huge land lie revealed; when Tiphys will disclose new worlds and Thule [Iceland] no more be the ultimate." Again, an error encouraged Columbus: Tiphys is the *pilot* of Jason's ship of legend, *Argo;* but the name Seneca actually wrote was Tethys, a sea nymph. The irony is that the Columbian version of the prophecy, whether miscopied or not, more accurately describes what he truly found than what he meant to find.

four

Out of the Canaries, Columbus met with winds light and variable enough to keep the fleet from making significant progress until the early morning of the second day when

a northeast breeze came on to move the ships westward. He had heard in the islands that Portuguese caravels were lurking nearby with a plan of either capturing his vessels or merely warning him to stay out of certain waters controlled by Portugal. Wherever those ships were, Columbus never encountered them, and his early difficulties came not from a rival nation but from *Santa María* herself plunging heavily and taking water over the bow so severely that she kept the fleet from making more than about one mile an hour. With heavy provisions restowed, the flagship leveled out and regained her speed to allow the flotilla to cover 130 miles by the following morning; on the fourth evening, the high volcano at Tenerife had slipped into invisibility. Now before the ships lay only ocean uncharted except in the imaginations of a few cartographers. Columbus must have felt the sea, its threat and promise, as never before, and surely his greatest aspiration, the Enterprise of the Indies, at last seemed eminently achievable.

The route he chose would allow him, so he reasoned, a chance to discover the long-presumed island of Antillia where the fleet might reprovision and, further, could claim such a crucial jumping-off place for the Spanish Crown and thereby return the first dividend. Even though Columbus selected what he thought the shortest and simplest route to reach Asia, a decision based upon his textual research and upon his previous experiences in the eastern Atlantic, he couldn't have known how far the

prevailing winds and currents of that latitude would aid him. His course, incidentally, is very close to one used today by sailing ships going from Europe to the West Indies. Had he departed from the Azores, islands due west of the Iberian peninsula but north of his route, he would have been fighting contrary winds and soon, in all likelihood, a mutinous crew. By leaving from the Canaries, a place the ancients called the Fortunate Islands, Columbus manifested the kind of shrewdness that makes luck almost a concomitant. Were two massive continents with the longest cordillera on the planet not blocking his path, his course indeed would have taken him close to southern Japan; as it was, he was heading for the Virgin Islands.

Soon after escaping the Canary calms, a crewman spotted the broken mast of a ship, a floating timber that could be useful in repairs or as firewood, but the men were unable to take it aboard. Whether that flotsam gave any of the mariners pause about the unknown sea they were entering, an ocean that could break up stout vessels, Columbus doesn't say.

A somewhat commonplace perception now exists that the three Columbian vessels were mere cockleshells. It's true that even the flagship *Santa María,* the largest of them, was not big for that time, but she and the other two were more than adequate for an Atlantic crossing. Each was well built, and once *Niña* was refitted, they all performed capably on an open sea and—the flagship excepted—were useful for explorations along shorelines.

Although no pictures of any kind depicting the vessels survive, we have some idea of their appearance from comments in the logbook and from comparison with other similar ships of the era. The several replicas of this famous trio constructed over the last century all derive from informed guesswork in shape, size, and rigging. *Santa María* was a *não*—"ship" in Portuguese—commonly used to transport cargo, and she was slower and less maneuverable than her consorts, which were of a type called caravels; never was *María* the favorite of Columbus, despite her more commodious captain's quarters. Her three masts carried white sails decorated with crosses and heraldic symbols. In all probability, *María* was less than eighty feet long, her beam or width less than thirty, her draft when loaded about seven feet. As with the others, her sides above the waterline were painted in bright colors, and below the line dark pitch covered the hull to discourage shipworms and barnacles.

All the vessels were closed to the sea—these were not the open boats of Leif Eriksson—and each presumably had a raised section aft, the poop deck where stood the officer of the watch and often Columbus. Beneath it was the helmsman; unable to see ahead, this steersman worked the heavy tiller connected to the large outboard rudder according to a compass, commands from the poop deck, and the feel of the ship herself in wind and water. Below the main deck were sets of oars used to create steerageway in calms or to maneuver in shallows or

move in or out of port. In the lowest area of the vessel were bilge pumps to empty seawater that finds its way into nearly any boat.

The crew, about forty men on the flagship and somewhat fewer on *Pinta* and *Niña,* slept wherever they could find an open and reasonably level space on deck or atop something; during clement nights, they slept topside but had to crowd below in hard weather or rough seas. After noticing on the First Voyage the hammocks of the Indians, sailors began creating for themselves more pleasant shipboard sleep. The officers in their quarters had actual small berths. Heads, or "latrines," were nothing more than several seats hanging over the rails both fore and aft, an arrangement that often provided an unexpected and probably not entirely unwelcome washing.

Each ship had a firebox for cooking; carried either on deck or in fair weather towed behind to free up deck space was a longboat or launch used to reach a wharf or beach or to sound shallows. Armaments were light and for defense or signaling only; individual arms consisted of crossbows, clumsy muskets, and the ubiquitous sailor's knife. The expedition was one of exploration and not military conquest because Columbus assumed the Grand Khan and other leaders in Asia would willingly place themselves under the authority of Spain, then more a loose collection of small kingdoms than one nation we know today.

Second in size was *Pinta,* the ship we know least about. Like *Niña,* she was a caravel, staunch craft that

operated nicely in windward work yet were still nimble enough to allow sailing in shallow water. *Pinta* made several later Atlantic crossings, her last one in 1500 when a hurricane overtook and capsized her in the southern Bahamas less than two hundred miles from where *Santa María* left her bones.

For sailing qualities, Columbus favored *Niña,* the ship he would return home in after *María* came to grief; he included *Niña* on both his Second and Third Voyages to the New World. Although the smallest of the three, she had four masts; the eminent naval historian and blue-water sailor Samuel Eliot Morison said *Niña* was "one of the greatest little ships in the world's history," yet she disappeared just seven years after her first voyage to America.

Spanish ships of that era carried both a religious name and a nickname. *Santa María* was known to her sailors as *La Gallega,* perhaps because she was built in Galicia; *Niña,* formally the *Santa Clara,* took her popular name from her owner, Juan Niño. For *Pinta,* neither her religious name nor how she came by her sobriquet has come down to us. In the annals of seafaring, nowhere else are the names of three otherwise ordinary ships so widely known.

five

Because of a potentially restive crew, one not accustomed to being out of sight of land for days on end, Columbus had considerable concern about the resolution of his men

to reach Asia, and he seized upon whatever he could to keep them believing the great eastern continent lay not far distant. Initially, pelagic birds served this end well. On the fourteenth of September, sailors on *Niña* reported seeing a tern and a tropic bird, species Columbus incorrectly—or conveniently—insisted kept within twenty-five leagues, a moderate day's sail, of shore. For the next three and a half weeks, he recorded more than a dozen sightings of birds, events he used to stoke his crew's resolve and remind everyone to remain alert for the first view of a coast. The man who spied it would receive a reward of a coat and ten months' wages paid in an annuity underwritten by a tax on meat shops. In that way, butchers helped Columbus reach the New World. Considering the carnage of the European conquest of the Americas, this link has a certain aptness.

The logbook rarely gives any direct statements about how Columbus *felt*—what his emotions were—during the long days on an uncharted ocean; if he set down such thoughts, only a few appear in the abstract. Perhaps there once were more sentences from him like this one of the sixteenth of September: "The savor of the mornings was a great delight, for nothing was lacking except to hear nightingales." How welcome would be other similar expressions from the man who led the most significant voyage in history. How fine it would be to see the man of flesh and hopes and frailties show through! But Columbus then was not much given to musing, and

he, an Italian, expresses himself in an unsophisticated Spanish.

He was seemingly incapable of self-doubt about conceptions of his God, the size of the Earth, the positions of oceans, and, later, his colossal role in the annals of discovery; yet, on that First Voyage especially, there must have been flickerings that he might have mistaken something in his geographical knowledge or misinterpreted an ancient text or misjudged the capacity of ordinary seamen to withstand trepidation natural to an expedition into unknown waters. Clearly it was to the advantage of his Enterprise for him never to admit any impediment except obvious and inescapable ones, but the consequence of such behavior is that today we see far more a commander than a man.

On that same September afternoon, the ships encountered the first bunches of gulf weed or sargassum, a floating plant that can extend for several miles, the stuff giving the Sargasso Sea its name. The vegetation did not hinder the ships; in fact, the crew, believing their leader who errantly said it was torn from a rocky shore, took heart in its appearance, ever more so when they found in it a small crab Columbus kept. The timely appearance of these living things fortuitously helped steady the men on that day when the pilots first observed their compass bearing no longer matching the position of Polaris, a circumstance the Captain General explained by telling them it was the North Star that shifted, not the needle; in this, he was

mostly correct, for in 1492 Polaris prescribed a circle of more than three degrees around the boreal pole; today it varies less than a full degree. Also at work was compass variation, a phenomenon not then understood. Surely Columbus must have spent much time just before and during the crossing in educating the sailors into his geographic conceptions, since the most likely initial cause of a mutiny to force a return to Spain would be ignorance.

The next day, Martín Alonso Pinzón, captain of the swift *Pinta,* saw a large flock of birds flying westward. Believing they were moving toward shore, he let his caravel run ahead of her companions in hope of spotting land first and claiming the sizable and remunerative honor. Columbus well realized that one of the comforting sights for the sailors was to look across the blank face of the ocean and catch sight of two other Spanish ships, just as he also knew fragmentation of the fleet not only would have grave consequences for their survival, but Pinzón's independent action could set a precedent that might foster a demand to turn back for Spain. Such a homeward retreat, however, was not likely to come from Pinzón himself, whose eagerness to discover unknown islands or establish the location of long-presumed ones matched Columbus's determination to find a western route to the Indies. *Pinta* returned the following day, but it was not the last time her capricious captain would break ranks in pursuit of his own ends.

The appearance that afternoon of a massive bank of

clouds to the north reinforced the Captain General's conviction that the fleet was indeed near land, but his overriding objective, unlike Pinzón's, was to reach Cipango, the great island off the coast of Asia that would serve as a stepping-stone to arrival in the Indies. Rather than chasing chimeric places, Columbus held course due west and presumed the return voyage would serve to discover long-supposed Atlantic isles. In this way, he proved himself a wiser navigator and a more reliable leader than the avaricious Pinzón.

Those who have argued, often for nationalistic reasons, that Martín Pinzón was the true commander of the Enterprise of the Indies and that Columbus was only titular head must reckon among other things with the Spaniard's impulsiveness. Could such a man, undoubtedly an able mariner, ever have succeeded in the endeavor? Of the nearly hundred sailors afloat that day far out on a strange ocean that could turn lethal in moments, there was but *one* man who had the geographical knowledge, navigational skill, unyielding determination, and shrewd leadership to reach the far side of the Atlantic. It was not Martín Alonso Pinzón.

six

The next several days provided more incidents from nature that assisted Columbus in holding the crew steady in *his* resolve: the continuation of sargassum was some

reassurance, but even more significant was a pair of birds that fluttered aboard *Santa María* and began singing. A seaman caught another bird which, upon examination, the Captain General averred (again incorrectly) to be a river species. On that evening he writes: "A booby came from the west-northwest and went southeast, which was a sign that it left land to the west-northwest, because these birds sleep on land and in the morning go out to sea to hunt for food and do not go farther than 20 leagues from land." The next day a whale surfaced, another supposed indication of a shore somewhere near.

But to Columbus the most helpful of the natural occurrences was the wind shifting against them to blow across the bows and into their faces. He says, "This contrary wind was of much use to me, because my people were all worked up thinking that no winds blew in these waters for returning to Spain." But a situation the following afternoon created potential for more fretting by the men when a calm sea quickly turned rough without apparent cause, a condition astounding everyone. The Captain General, missing no chance to urge on his crew, played this change into a biblical allusion with grand implications to support his crafty leadership; he writes: "Very useful to me was the high sea, [a sign] such as had not appeared save in the time of the Jews when they came up out of Egypt [and grumbled] against Moses who delivered them out of captivity."

On September twenty-fifth, Columbus and Pinzón

had a conversation—the ships alongside in the calm water—with both men agreeing there must be islands nearby. But where were they? Soon after, while the Commander was trying to replot their position, Pinzón suddenly appeared on the poop deck of *Pinta* and in much excitement called over the quiet sea that he was claiming the reward for spotting land. Columbus rushed out, dropped to his knees in thanks, and each ship resounded with *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Sailors went up the masts and riggings on *Niña,* and until dark, everybody on every vessel stared at the shadowy shore. The fleet altered course from west to southwest toward it. In the slick water, the men celebrated with a swim and a salty bath, their joy enhanced by creatures long a delight to anyone at sea, porpoises.

By morning the ebullience was gone. The "land" had been nothing more than clouds on the horizon, a condition that often fools seafarers, sometimes disastrously. Again the fleet turned westward. For such a phantom not to have appeared at all would have been better than for the sailors to undergo an abrupt deflation of a sweet expectation. It may be telling of their temperament during the next few days that they killed several porpoises.

As the miles through calm water continued, doubts about the ships being able to sail home before depleting their fresh water must have rekindled. In retrospect, we can see today that had the fleet faced continuous and reassuring, homeward-bound winds, it's unlikely the

expedition could have held out long enough against them to reach the western side of the Atlantic. Columbus faced a quandary: Whatever direction the wind blew or didn't blow, there was peril.

The large number of birds in several flocks and the variety of species convinced him the birds were not simply strays or wanderers, and this time he was correct, for the great autumnal migrations had begun. Watching the flights pass so easily and swiftly, the mariners must have envied them as wings overtook the ships slogging along in near calms. Even the flying fish moved faster. By the first of October, doubts and discontents, and irritations of confined and uncertain men increased to a dangerous degree. No one aboard any of the vessels had ever been so long out of sight of land. Columbus finally concluded the flotilla had somehow passed through the string of islands he believed lay east of Cipango, evidence that should have alerted him to the difference between his imaginatively filled-in chart and the truth of the Atlantic, yet he apparently used the absence of the presumed isles as further proof that he was beyond Cipango and nearing Cathay. His deductive mind was not to change easily, if at all, but, as with so many other aspects of his career at sea, even this error benefited him, even if in no way other than protecting him from potential doubts.

On the morning of October seventh, swift *Niña,* having pulled ahead of the fleet to give those men the best chance of claiming the reward, raised a flag on her

tallest mast and fired a small cannon to signal that her crew had spotted land. *Pinta* and *Santa María* soon came up and for the rest of the day their crewmen strained to see what the *Niña* sailors had claimed, but before them was only more ocean. After that, Columbus declared that another false *"Tierra!"* would disqualify a man from the reward.

Earlier, he had ordered the ships to gather close to him each sunrise and sunset, ostensibly to equalize the competition for a initial sighting at the time when light is most favorable for seeing far, but he was also aware that his slow flagship gained an advantage with its high mast. The great Enterprise was his idea, and he wanted to be the man history would record as the first to sight some far piece of Asia after a westward voyage.

Observing the numbers of birds passing to the southwest reminded him that the Portuguese had discovered the farthest Azores by following avian flocks—and perhaps also considering Pinzón's urge to change course to a more southwesterly one—Columbus decided to deviate for two days from his due westward heading to take up a rhumb aligned with the flights of terns and boobies, a decision that would change history. Even in the darkness the sailors heard the migrating birds: If there were sounds or sights that could give them reassurance short of a breaking surf or a tree-girt isle, those aerial flappings and squawkings, the winged silhouettes against a bright moon, must have served.

Despite his phony reckonings, everyone knew by then the ships were well beyond the area Columbus had predicted they would find land. He was increasingly alone in his insistence on continuing west, and it didn't help that of all the men, he was one of only five who were not Spaniards. His very accent must have isolated him yet further.

Columbus did what a good commander should do. He held counsel with the three captains, listened, and compromised enough to gain their further temporary acceptance of his plan: If after three days the expedition had come upon no land, he would then, and only then, turn homeward. Or so he said.

Various legal depositions made many years later by pro-Pinzón sailors claimed it was Columbus who wanted to give up and Martín Alonso who demanded the flotilla continue west, but their evidence is too biased, too much challenged by other witnesses and events, and, above all, too far out of keeping with the character of Columbus to be credible. A person driven by both an idea and an ideal, one who believes his God favors his work, will outlast those motivated only by money. Columbus was in no way averse to financial compensation for his long efforts, but that was not the primary goal then pushing him. For him, his compelling geographical concept, one in his mind underwritten by a deity, was the force that would drive the three ships on toward opening new riches to Europe.

On the tenth of October the fleet made its longest twenty-four-hour run of the entire outbound voyage, nearly two hundred miles, but by that point leagues away from home were to the crewmen more worrisome than gladsome. Of that day Las Casas says: "Here the men could no longer stand it; they complained of the long voyage. But [Columbus] encouraged them as best he could, giving them good hope of the benefits that they would be able to secure. And he added that it was useless to complain since he had come to find the Indies and thus had to continue the voyage until he found them, with the help of Our Lord."

Despite this wise combination of encouragement and adamantine will, how easy could the Captain General's sleep have been then? What was to prevent mutinous sailors from pitching him overboard—reported as an accident—and then turning the ships toward home? Perhaps it was their commander's force of character, or the influence of the three ship captains, or maybe it was their belief that he was the man most capable of getting them safely returned. Whatever held Columbus in precarious security during those days of increasing tension and unrest, he knew the men's resolution and forbearance of mutiny would not likely last much longer. When the threads holding the enterprise together were ready to snap, he was only hours away from setting down the most momentous entry ever in any nautical record.

seven

On Thursday, the eleventh of October, a strong trade wind kicked up the roughest sea the ships had yet encountered, but new kinds of flotsam cheered them: freshly green reeds and cane, a branch full of blossoms, a small plank, and, above all, a "little stick fashioned with iron." Columbus, now certain that a landfall was just ahead, addressed the sailors of *María* to urge them to greater vigilance and remind them of the reward waiting the mariner with the keenest eyes.

At sundown he brought his course back to due west, a change that may have prevented a reefing, and he rescinded his recent order to do no night sailing, surely to give himself a greater chance to cover more miles before the three days were up. To move so swiftly in dark, unknown waters added to an atmosphere already tense with expectation and competition. He who called out a false sighting would lose the reward, and he who waited a moment too long could lose his life. Martín Pinzón in *Pinta* led the way.

At ten that evening, the moon, a little past full, was yet an hour from rising when Columbus thought he saw a firelight, a *lumbre,* but he was so uncertain he asked a servant—not an officer—to confirm it; that fellow also thought he could see it from moment to moment. But a third underling detected nothing. The light, writes Columbus, "was like a little wax candle lifting and rising."

Then an able seaman, Pedro Yzquierdo, cried out, "*Lumbre! Tierra!*" Columbus calmly responded, "I saw and spoke of that light, which is on land, some time ago." Then it vanished for everybody. Was there actually a light? With the fleet at least thirty-five miles from land, it's more plausible the *lumbre* was a natural conjuration not uncommon on a dark ocean, especially to watchers straining to see something specific. The next day Columbus must have realized as much, yet he would use that ephemeral and uncertified luminescence to claim the reward for himself. His motive was less likely greed than the natural unwillingness of a man who gives most of his life to an idea only to have an uninformed latecomer pop up to claim it. For Columbus, the light could be the first real proof of his vigorous contention about the narrow width of the Ocean Sea; for him, *that* was the greater prize; in fact, he did not keep the annuity but gave it to Beatriz Enríquez, the mother of his younger son. As for Pedro Yzquierdo, he was so angered at losing the reward he later renounced Christianity to become a Muslim.

The night wore on, the spectral sails full under the moon, prows slicing through the black swells, sailors tiring and reluctantly giving in to sleep. Those who dozed off were to wake in not just the New World of the Americas but into a new world of concepts and commodities, politics and possibilities, genes and genocides. Even the one man on board whose comprehension and imagination extended furthest, he the commander, soon to be

Admiral of the Ocean Sea, would never quite understand what those wooden prows were cutting open.

eight

On Friday, October twelfth, at two in the morning, Juan Rodríguez Bermejo aboard *Pinta* sang out to his shipmates, "*Tierra! Tierra!*" Ahead, illuminated dimly by moonlight lay a whitish bluff above a dark shoreline. To Columbus it had to be some part of Asia, perhaps one of the islands off Japan. He and a few others were right after all! Hadn't he proved the distance from Europe to the Far East was not great? His flotilla had crossed the Ocean Sea in only thirty-three days on a voyage not especially difficult. (The 1607 English voyage to establish Jamestown, Virginia, took four and half months.) Except for the uncertainty of the crewmen, the ease of it was far more remarkable than all of its difficulties combined.

This much is correct: He had turned two millennia of geographic theorizing about the Atlantic—most of it incorrect, some fantastically so—into arcane lore fit only for texts about ancient history. In just over a month, three small wooden ships with hulls shaped like pecans had remade the map of the blue planet. Wealth beyond anyone's dreams now surely lay before the mariners. But had Columbus known where he truly was, he would have been deeply disappointed. He wasn't much interested in